DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 008 PS 024 724

AUTHOR	Wolf, Kathy Goetz
TITLE	Parents Leading the Way.
INSTITUTION	Family Resource Coalition, Chicago, IL.; National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice, Iowa City, IA.
SPONS AGENCY	Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (DHHS), Washington, D.C.; Danforth Foundation, St. Louis, Mo.
REPORT NO	ISSN-1041-8660
PUB DATE	96
CONTRACT	90-CW-1084/01
NOTE	37p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Family Resource Coalition, 200 South Michigan Avenue, 16th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Family Resource Coalition Report; v15 n2 Sum 1996
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Activism; Advocacy; *Children; Community Involvement; Community Programs; Computer Networks; Decision Making; Developmental Disabilities; *Family Involvement; *Family Programs; Family Relationship; Family Role; Leadership; *Parent Participation; *Parents; Personal Narratives; Policy; Policy Formation; Program Evaluation; Questioning Techniques; Social Action
IDENTIFIERS	*Family Support

ABSTRACT

This special issue of the Family Resource Coalition Report presents personal experiences and reflections regarding parent involvement and leadership in family support. Articles in this issue are: (1) "The Vaughn Family Center: It's My Story" (Jorge Lara and Matt Oppenheim); (2) "Asking the Right Questions is Key to Developing Parent Advocacy" (Luz Santana); (3) "Parents United and Uniting" (Mark Smith); (4) "New York Parents Become Partners in Policy Making" (Sally Mehrtens and others); (5) "Getting Involved in State-Level Planning: One Parent Walks the Long, Rocky Road of Collaboration" (Carmen Siberon); (6) "Using Computers to Build Local Community: Newark Residents are Turning MUSIC Into Health and Education" (Pamela Morgan); (7) "Parent Network Empowers a Community" (Beverly Bell, Jr.); (8) "Houston Family Advocacy Network is Parents' Vehicle for Change: FAN Members Speak"; (9) "Community Involvement in Program Decision Making" (Bryan Samuels and Tony Markward); (10) "Becoming a Board Member: A Parent's Story"; (11) "Georgia's Youth Futures Authority Involves Youths and Adults in Local Planning" (Jacqueline Elmore); (12) "Parent Network Center: Parents Help Each Other Advocate for Children with Disabilities" (Joan M. Watkins); (13) "Turning Up the Volume on Parent Feedback In Evaluation" (Nilofer Ahsan); (14) "Empowering Parents is Mining Diamonds in the Rough" (Ted Bowman); and (15) "National Parent Assembly: Opportunities, Challenges, and Results" (Lucy Trujillo and Kathy Goetz Wolf). (KDFB)

FAMILY RESOURCE COALITION

report

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Parents Leading the Way

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Summer 1996

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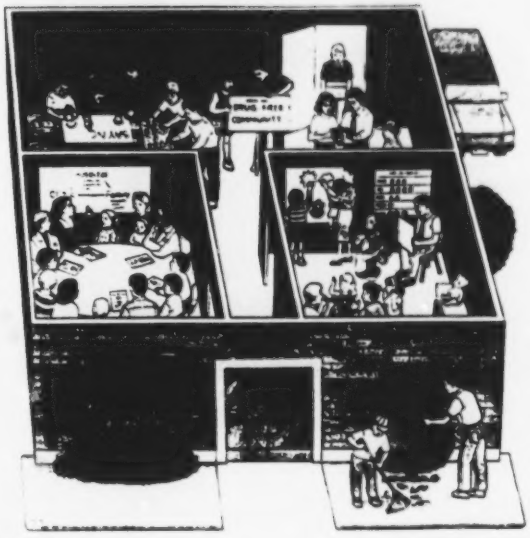

Parents are leading the way to community ownership of the programs that serve children and families. And in creating this special-focus issue of FRC *Report*, parents also led the way. FRC wishes to thank first and foremost the parent leaders, organizers, planners, and program participants who gave generously of their time and talents to create this publication. Many, many parents and others working in parent-led programs wrote about their efforts or agreed to be interviewed for this *Report*; their hard work will help others navigate the difficult road to empowerment.

Maria Elena Orrego, FRC's Washington, D.C., liaison, contributed significantly to this issue; her knowledge, experience working with parents, and commitment to parent empowerment made her input invaluable. Many thanks to her and FRC staff Bryan Samuels, Joanne Kelly, Anthony Williams, and Brenda Rodriguez for contacting parent leaders, reviewing content, providing information for the resource file, and contributing to the vision for this project.

FRC Report thanks the Danforth Foundation for its support of this publication and of the Parent Assembly. Without their generosity these efforts would not have been possible.

This issue of *FRC Report* was produced in part by the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Administration on Children, Youth, and Families; Children's Bureau, cooperative agreement number 90-CW-1084/01 under contract with the University of Iowa School of Social Work. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funders, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

REPORT

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Printer: BOOKLET PUBLISHING

Family Resource Coalition is a membership, consulting, and advocacy organization that has been advancing the movement to strengthen and support families since 1981. The family support movement and FRC seek to strengthen and empower families and communities so that they can foster the optimal development of children, youth, and adult family members. FRC builds networks, produces resources, advocates for public policy, provides consulting services, and gathers knowledge to help the family support movement grow. For information or to become a member, contact FRC at 200 S. Michigan Ave., 16th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604, 312/341-0900, 312/341-9361 (fax).

The opinions expressed in the *FRC Report* are those of the authors; the *Report* strives to include a variety of perspectives from the family support field.

The *FRC Report* is published quarterly in the public interest by the Family Resource Coalition, a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization. Membership in the Coalition includes a subscription to the *FRC Report*. Readers are encouraged to copy and share its content; we ask you to credit the Family Resource Coalition as the original source of information.

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About This Issue

Maria Elena Orrego
FRC Washington, D.C., Liaison

It is both an honor and a great pleasure to introduce this Family Resource Coalition *Report*, "Parents Leading the Way." The experiences, stories, struggles, and reflections shared in this issue are shining examples of what parent involvement and leadership in family support is all about and what a fundamental force for change it represents for the future of children, families, and communities nationwide.

Each article validates and affirms what I have experienced and learned as a parent and community worker throughout the years. I still remember my own beginnings as a parent involved with my first child day-care center. We parents and the teachers sat in tiny, child-sized chairs as we tried to figure out how to clean up a huge pile of dangerous trash from a backyard so our children could have a decent playground. It was a lot of work, but we did it. Sitting in those little chairs we also plotted how to keep the Washington, D.C., government from cutting our 64 childcare slots in half; we staged a sit-in right in the offices of the director of the Human Services Department. I still remember the faces of the bureaucrats as we piled ourselves—parents, toddlers, teachers, friends, relatives, and other supporters—in the hallways. They must have loved the diaper changing, snacking, crying, and laughter that went on, because in the end they did not cut our childcare! It took a lot of faith and courage, but we did it. Those experiences and accomplishments gave us confidence to carry on and take on other projects and struggles. They also prepared me for more community organizing efforts.

The issue of parent involvement has gotten much attention in recent years, due largely to enlightened federal and state legislation that has "forced" the issue by requiring that consumers be involved in planning human services. Many parent leaders and those working with them write in this *Report* of how they have taken part in systems change. They share their sources of inspiration and frustration; from them, we learn that if we are to effectively reform family-serving systems, we must multiply efforts to involve parents and, especially, to make sure that parents in poor and in minority communities are well supported to participate in systems reform—not as token representatives, but as full partners. As those of us working to strengthen and support families know, parent involvement is not some kind of "fad" that will pass. It is the core of systems change. It is the only thing that can make true reform in human services possible.

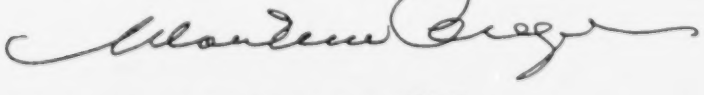
Many of us in the family support field have been busy trying to create meaningful opportunities for parent involvement and leadership on many levels, and as evidenced by the experiences and wisdom shared by the authors on the following pages, we have indeed come a long way. Among the principal lessons we have learned is that creating these opportunities requires a whole new way of thinking about roles and relationships between parents and providers. This new way leads to sharing power and control. Sharing power is uncommon in mainstream American culture, yet the most powerful examples in this *Report* come from parents who are organizing their communities by utilizing a shared leadership approach.

In spite of our progress, we still have a long way to go toward building partnerships between parents and family-serving professionals and developing programs that are truly family-centered. Although good intentions abound, parents for the most part do not share in controlling and planning family services, agencies, and systems. To establish a full partnership among parents and others in service planning at all levels, parents must be listened to with full attention and complete respect for their thinking. And both practitioners and parents must commit unconditionally to building long-lasting, supportive relationships, whether that means supporting parents' efforts to care for their families or working together to develop a strategic plan to care for all families in the community.

Finally, we must resist the temptation to limit parent involvement to a few chosen contexts. We must not allow ourselves to think that we have reached the goal of parent involvement because one or two or even 10 parents sit on an advisory council, steering committee, or board of directors. Parent involvement is a process of development that occurs at home as a parent supervises his or her child's homework, on the bus as one parent tells another where to find help in the community, in the clinic as a parent asks questions about his or her child's health and development, in a support group as parents share their stories and encourage each other, in a prenatal education class, in a meeting between a parent and a special education teacher to plan the child's screening and curriculum, during a program activity in which parents meet with the board of trustees, in a meeting of a neighborhood governing board, and in countless other contexts.

Valuing the great diversity of roles parents can play and functions they can perform—that is, valuing parent involvement—means that we must provide ample resources and types of support, starting with creating welcoming atmospheres in all human services programs; providing essential support such as childcare, transportation, and meals; making information easily obtainable and culturally accessible; facilitating coaching and mentoring; and creating opportunities for parents to build skills and acquire training that enable them to assume and sustain leadership roles and allow them to bring other parents along as leaders.

These pages reflect many different experiences with parent involvement: you will hear from parents, family support practitioners, and others who are trying to clear the way for parents to have a say in systems that are intended to serve children and families. But all of these articles affirm the foundation of family support: supporting and strengthening families is about building relationships, listening and communicating effectively, sharing resources and collaborating, building mutual trust and respect, and recognizing that there must be equal participation in making real our vision of a future of peace and well-being for our families.



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The Vaughn Family Center: It's My Story

by Jorge Lara with Matt Oppenheim

When I came to the U.S. I was angry and afraid. My heart was still in Mexico, my father was alcoholic, and I couldn't find work. But I was also a social activist and a self-starter. At the age of seven I was selling popsicles, newspapers, and bread on the streets of Ciudad Guzman in Jalisco, Mexico. At school we held a strike to stop corruption and got the principal fired. Later, while living in Florida, I learned more about how to stand up for my rights from the Cubans.

After we moved to California, my daughter entered the school in Pacoima, where there were mainly Black and Latino students but teachers who were almost all Anglo. I felt that many of the problems children faced were racial. Teachers were judgmental, and that caused resentment from parents. We hired a neutral principal who was Chinese, and she encouraged parents to work with the teachers.

Author Jorge Lara, Job Developer at Vaughn Family Center, San Fernando, California.

My daughter wasn't learning and no one would help her. Finally the principal got her into special education. That was a turning point for me, because I began to trust the principal. Then I started volunteering at the school. I began to notice many problems. There were often four benches full of kids sitting in the hot sun going through detention. Could this be right?

One day in 1990 I was invited to help administer the state achievement test to first-graders. I felt that the teacher wanted them to fail so that the school would get more money for special programs. During the test I cried and had to leave. After that I promised myself that I would do whatever it took to guarantee the success of every child in my community.

The welfare systems kills the spirit of the people. I have witnessed families being destroyed. It is very difficult to see people losing their dreams and the desire to achieve goals. I promised myself I would never go on welfare and that I would do whatever it took to stop people in my community from doing so. People were afraid to get involved in the school, because they had been used so many times before. It takes us a long time to build trust.

A group of parents started to talk about the need for changes. Later, two community facilitators from Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) and United Way came and said they wanted to work with us. They'd heard that our school was one of the worst in Los Angeles. At first we were skeptical, but they convinced us that they wanted to understand our needs and assist us in creating a school-based family support initiative. We decided that family health and school readiness were our greatest concerns. They invited service providers from agencies, who listened and agreed to work with us on our own terms. We formed a commission comprised of parents and these providers to oversee the development of our family center. They tried to convince us that the center should be run by "professionals," but we wanted to run the center, too. People often saw us as having deficits, but we knew that we were "experts." Through this planning process, the Vaughn Family Center was born.

Soon Yoland Trevino was hired as Director. We wanted someone special, who would be our mentor, guide, and advocate. In the interview we challenged Yoland to see if she had the qualities that we needed in our community, and it was soon obvious that she was the right one for the position. A group of parent volunteers started working with her. She helped us express our anger and pushed us to develop skills and use our initiative. When funds came through I was hired as a part-time family advocate. At first, I thought that money was just handed out to schools and programs. Now I know a lot more about getting grants, and have helped develop several myself. It was obvious that I would be making less than half what I had been making as an electrician, but I decided to continue. For the first time I saw new hope for my community. They asked me for my commitment and I said, "You have it." My wife was strongly opposed at first. She could not understand why I would contribute less to my own family to serve children who were not related to me. Little did she know that this would bring great success to our family, that it would bring happiness and opportunities to us and our children. She now volunteers and is as committed as I am. She helps guide my decisions for the success of the community.

Yoland brought people in to offer training at the Vaughn Family Center. I quickly learned basic office and social-work skills. When I started calling agencies on the

phone I was almost trembling because I felt so inferior, but Yoland instilled in me the knowledge that I was working for the people of the community and had a right to be assertive. Then I started doing family visits. The first few times my heart was in my throat and I couldn't go. Then after seeing a few families I became ecstatic: It was easier than I thought. I was making a good connection with families in need and felt that we were starting to make a difference. I learned a great deal from these families, including the ability to understand that their strengths could support their needs. We connected them with health and counseling services and provided free food and clothing. I was their cheerleader, coach, and mentor.

Community members in the Pacoima Urban Village remove graffiti from a public mural.

From the start, the family center was my family: everyone cared and supported one another. We started dreaming about the future and talking about our vision. We wanted a safe environment for our children where they could succeed in life. But we wanted more. We wanted everyone to have financial independence and to take charge of the future of our community.

The school became one of the first Chartered schools in California, and I served on several of the many committees that ran the school. The Chartered Schools Initiative allows schools to become independent from the school district and be governed by parents and teachers. The hardest job was sitting on the budget committee, where there were constant arguments about funds. I felt that some of the teachers wanted money for themselves and didn't really want to help the community. Other teachers were great and cared a lot for the needs of our children.

I became a mentor for volunteers and realized that it was important to be a role model. I have started teaching them the way that Yoland taught me, encouraging their self-confidence and challenging them to take the initiative, while giving them support whenever they needed it. The other day a new community coordinator said he was scared to call an agency on the phone. I told him that he wasn't speaking for himself but for the center and the community. He came to me later with a big smile and said that he had enjoyed making the call.

A businessman, Kay Inaba, came to us two years ago and started talking about the "Pacoima Urban Village." I was wondering what his angle was, but after a while realized that he wanted to help. He helped us dream about our future as a village becoming self-sufficient by unleashing human capital. We believed the village would become a healthy, safe, and clean community.

We recently opened a center for the Pacoima Urban Village where people come in droves to find out about jobs and training opportunities that we post. We try to tell each person who visits about our vision and inspire them to volunteer. The job club has become the core of our community's unfolding.

A Parent Leader's Tips for Promoting Parent Involvement

1. Parents and community members have a lot to express and have a lot of skills already; just support them and encourage them to become who they already are.
2. The community belongs to the people who live there; they have to make the decisions.
3. Professionals have to be partners with parents, and parent leaders have to be respected and paid just the same as anyone else.
4. Teach people by being a good role model, and give them a lot of freedom to experiment and express themselves.
5. Dream about the future, and learn how to make your dreams a reality.
6. Don't use language that diminishes people and their community, such as "at risk," "dysfunctional," and "case management" (who is in the position to manage someone's life?).
7. Never underestimate the role of parents and community members.
8. Never come with your own agenda to a neighborhood. Ask people what they want. They are the experts.
9. Don't exploit community knowledge. In many communities, outside experts have come and used residents' knowledge to dominate them. Show that you can be trusted to not do the same.

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Community members graduate from their training as outreach workers for the Pacoima Urban Village.

It has created an atmosphere in which partners in the project mix with community members. They learn from each other, reflect upon experiences, develop aspirations, discover opportunities for employment and economic development, and give back to their community. We formed an organization called Americans for Better Communities (ABC), a national collaboration among people in the Midwest, New York, and Los Angeles. All of us are working to promote the socio-economic status and infrastructure of our communities. We arranged for a group of former gang members to go to New York to take part in a program called Banana Kelly, where they learned about construction and business management. Now they're back and have started renovating a house.

Now I do so many things it's hard to keep track of them. I work in the Pacoima Urban Village, helping people to get jobs and training. I still see some of my family clients and help them out from time to time. I work in collaboration with community-based organizations, businesses, and churches. I am a member of the board of directors of an organization that helps local social programs to work together. Our center recently won a grant to work with Los Angeles Urban Funders (LAUF) in developing a plan for the future of our village. We are mentoring five other community centers and work with area business people. I have traveled all over the states to talk about our program and provide parent training. I am also a member of the Family Resource Coalition.

I often see people that are just like I was: angry and afraid, with nowhere to turn. You can't imagine how great it feels to be able to help lift them up, and I still often cry about it.

Staff of the Vaughn Family Center meet over a meal.

Jorge Lara is Job Developer at Vaughn Family Center, 13330 Vaughn Street, San Fernando, CA 91340, 818/834-1498 (phone), 818/834-1492 (fax).

Matt Oppenheim is an ethnographer from California State University, Long Beach, who is writing about the Pacoima Urban Village as a dynamic learning community. He wants to utilize local knowledge in reforming curricula and to assist community building through self-evaluation.

7

Asking the Right Questions is Key to Developing Parent Advocacy

by Luz Santana

In a church basement in western Massachusetts, parents brainstorm a list of questions:

Is my child learning math?

How is my child learning it?

What is the math curriculum?

How is what my child is learning related to the curriculum?

Who decided on this curriculum?

What is the process involved in meeting with the teacher?

Who else can give me information?

What is the homework? How does what my child is receiving compare to what other children are receiving?

What skills are my child developing?

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Since 1991, the Right Question Project, Inc., (RQP) has been helping parents ask these types of questions and, in doing so, develop the skills they need to participate more effectively in their children's education and occupy different roles in relation to the schools in their communities. The RQP model, which started on the local level in Massachusetts and has been replicated nationwide thanks to the DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, consists of a series of four workshops led by parents, family workers, community activists, and teachers.

Through the workshops, parents are challenged to understand the concept of formal and informal education and to think critically, analyze, and strategize to become effective participants in their children's education. Effective parent participation involves parents:

- gathering information about what their children need to be learning
- monitoring what the teachers are teaching and what their children are learning
- taking action to support their children as well as the teachers

In general, effective parent participation means parents having the confidence to take an active role in setting an agenda, participating in decisions being made around their children's education and holding their children's schools accountable.

How Does RQP Work?

RQP develops the capacity of communities to increase effective parental involvement. In order to reach as many parents as possible, RQP trains facilitators who are parents, school staff, community organizers . . . anyone who is interested in helping parents participate more effectively in their children's education. Facilitators are recruited through organizations that share the goal of increasing effective parent involvement. Both the facilitators and the organizations make a commitment to implement the curriculum with parents.

The RQP Curriculum

In the RQP workshops, parents base their discussions on the following questions:

What is my child learning? What does my child need to learn? Is the teacher teaching what my child needs to learn? Is my child learning what he/she needs? If the teacher is not teaching what my child needs to learn, what can I do? If the teacher is teaching what my child needs to learn, what else can I do?

The formulation of questions is at the center of the RQP model. By formulating questions, parents address educational issues as well as other issues affecting their lives. Rather than providing parents with a list of questions they should ask, RQP helps parents develop skills that will allow them to skillfully address different situations in their lives by thinking critically. An interactive format allows participants to shape the content of the workshops. The facilitator helps parents learn from each other based on their own questions and experiences. This strategy results in participants bringing their own expertise instead of depending on "experts." When parents in communities develop a sense of being able to advocate for themselves, the interaction with schools, as well as with other community groups, changes substantially.

This model of parental participation develops parents' leadership by providing opportunities for them to discover and strengthen the skills they already have. Participants in the workshops have stated that the process helps them to: become more confident, define the kind of information they need, gather information, think about things they never thought about before, experience satisfaction and accomplishment after meeting with teachers and practicing their skills, and view learning as an important process for themselves as well as for their children.

All of this is done in a series of simple exercises in which participants are able to use their knowledge and life experiences. This model was developed after working with groups of parents who repeatedly named one of the critical obstacles to participation in their children's education: they didn't even know what questions to ask.

Luz Santana is Director of the Right Question Project Training Center, Massachusetts Parent Training and Empowerment Project, 218 Holland Street, Somerville, MA 02144, 617/628-1070 (phone), 617/628-8632 (fax).

Parents United and Uniting

by Mark Smith

Parents need high-quality, affordable child care. Nearly 10 years ago a group of Boston parents started meeting informally to discuss the issue. Eventually we formed Parents United for Child Care (PUCC). Our mission is to add a strong parent voice to the public debates over child care and family policy that bear so much influence on our child care systems.

©1996, Stephen Shames

PUCC is a grassroots, multi-racial organization of 2,000 low- and moderate-income people dedicated to expanding the availability of affordable, quality child care in Massachusetts and to providing a parent voice on public policy issues related to families and children.

We are an organized constituency of parents from throughout the state that is working to win improvements in child care and family policy. PUCC pursues this goal by empowering parents who are affected by these policies.

PUCC: A Portrait

PUCC is a group of parents united and uniting around our mutual concern for child care. We are working and non-working parents. We are parents from many different rungs on the socio-economic ladder. We are African American, Latino, white, Cape Verdean, Haitian, and Brazilian parents. We are parents from every neighborhood of Boston and many communities around the state of Massachusetts. We are parents who fight against isolation from each other in our neighborhoods and city. We are parents who struggle with the overwhelming pressures of everyday life, and we are parents who try to cope with busy, disjointed schedules on top of striving to be and do the best for our children. And as parents, being and doing the best for our children necessitates linking our concerns and joys with other parents: uniting our hands, we are connected to one another; uniting our voices, we are louder; uniting our neighborhoods, we are more powerful. And uniting as parents, we share with each other our common love and concern for our children.

The linchpin of the many aspects of PUCC's work is organizing parents to become effective advocates for themselves and their children. At the level of the school, the community-based program, the neighborhood, the city, and the state, PUCC works with parents to help them become involved in the critical debates and decisions that impact their lives. These parents seek to increase the capacity, quality, and affordability of child care in inner-city neighborhoods, particularly those that are impacted by welfare reform or have an inadequate supply of affordable child care.

Successes in Quality School-Age Care

PUCC's first campaign was for school-age child care. We surveyed more than 5,500 families to document parents' child care needs, reaching parents in their own languages. PUCC then launched the Boston School-Age Child Care Project (BSACCP) in response to those needs. Now in its fourth year of operation, BSACCP's top priority is to increase the accessibility of school-age care through technical assistance, funding to promote sliding-scale fees, and provision of written resources and referrals. Because of PUCC's leadership on the issue of school-age care, Boston received one of three national grants awarded by the Dewitt Wallace Reader's Digest Fund as part of the Fund's MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) Initiative. The three-year, $1.2 million grant, which has leveraged other money for school-age care, is used to make out-of school programs more affordable for low-income parents and to support several model programs that have incorporated creative and innovative strategies to improve the quality of school-age care.

Changing Public Policy

Another important focus of PUCC's work is to engage and train parents to be active in the public policy arena. Parents in PUCC's Public Action Committee monitor the state budget and funding of child care and are trained to lobby their legislators. Parents lobby to increase the budget for child care subsidies and to support welfare reform legislation that truly leads low-income parents to self-sufficiency and guarantees quality, affordable child care. While PUCC has been successful in influencing key policy and budget policies at the state and city levels, it is working with parents at the local, grassroots level that ensures parents have a role in determining how resources are allocated in their neighborhoods.

This coming year PUCC will begin three exciting new initiatives that will enhance its current work. Through its Leadership Development Program, it will train parents to become neighborhood leaders and spokespeople regarding the child care needs in their neighborhoods. Second, PUCC's Public Awareness Campaign (part of the BSACCP/MOST Initiative) will seek to elevate the issues of accessible and quality school-age care in the public eye. Third, a proactive advocacy campaign will be aimed at increasing access to child care for working poor families who do not receive any welfare-related child care assistance. The campaign's goal is to engage more parents in the local and statewide debate, and ultimately to increase child care subsidies for parents who are coming off of welfare and yet cannot access the child care they need because of its costs.

Mark Smith is Assistant Director for Community Organizing at PUCC, 30 Winter Street, Boston, MA 02108, 617/542-1515 (phone), 617/426-8288 (fax). He and his wife live in Boston and have a two-year-old son.

New York Parents Become Partners in Policy Making

by Sally Mehrtens
with Anna Lobosco and Carol Nash

Partners in Policy Making teaches individuals with developmental disabilities and their family members to become informed, productive partners with those who are in positions to make local, state, and federal policy changes. Parents in Policy Making training has been offered by the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (DDPC) since 1991; it is built on a model developed in 1987 by the Minnesota Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities.

The workshops, offered over consecutive weekends, encourage parents to envision a future that they desire and can work toward. Families involved in early intervention who recently took part in the program envisioned a world in which early intervention is family-centered and does not isolate parents, parent groups are encouraged, and there is recognition that parents know their children best.

To enable parents to realize their visions, Partners in Policy Making provides training that breaks down the wall of frustration for parents by educating them about their rights and providing them with the leadership skills they need to be assertive when seeking services for their children.

Partners in Policy Making trains participants in a number of skills, beginning with how to handle meetings with officials. Included are techniques for assertive communication in meetings and over the telephone, handling behavior that does not appear to value family input, negotiating, and public speaking. Local, regional, and state legislators and policymakers are invited to attend and interact with participants as part of the training. Participants also work on developing management and leadership skills. This training covers topics such as running a successful meeting, involving others, and influencing authorities.

At every session, "homework" is assigned, which participants report upon at the next session. Homework assignments include writing letters and making telephone calls to legislators and policymakers, collecting information as part of a group or individual project, sharing information with other families, and organizing local forums.

Partners in Policy Making is tailored to specific groups of participants. Usually, 40 to 50 individuals come together for three to six monthly training weekends. Sessions begin on Friday afternoon and end Saturday afternoon after 11 to 12 hours of activities. Meals and accommodations are provided, and participants are reimbursed for travel and childcare costs that are directly related to their participation in the training. The DDPC presents the training to families from many cultures; the contents of the training are modified to meet the needs of specific communities, and portable translation equipment is used.

Parents Work Together

A most important aspect of Partners in Policy Making is the time given for participants to interact with presenters and network with each other. The intensive format of the sessions brings participants together without distraction and allows them to exchange information and provide mutual support to each other. Experts in specific fields present up-to-date information at each session and are available to further discuss current issues in the field. All activities are interactive and activities-based.

Participants also have the opportunity to work with each other in developing action plans to take back to their communities. These action plans have included starting a community family support group, establishing a hotline for parents and professionals to answer questions, producing a video on early intervention services to be shown on public television, developing a computerized database of families who could share support and skills, working with childcare providers to improve their skills in working with children with disabilities, and providing a variety of training opportunities to sensitize professionals to the needs of families. Often, these plans include informing legislators and policymakers of specific needs in a way that emphasizes the importance of families.

DDPC has presented modified Partners in Policy Making sessions jointly with the New York State Departments of Health and Education. These sessions have offered leadership development activities to parents of children enrolled in early intervention programs and to families of children with special health care needs and individuals with traumatic brain injuries.

Over the last six years, DDPC has sponsored 17 regional Partners in Policy Making trainings. Nearly 1,200 people have completed Partners in Policy Making; about three-quarters of them have assumed leadership roles at the local, regional, state, or national levels. "Partners" chair about half of the 21 regional Family Support Councils. They also are members of all 21 councils, most of the 62 county and borough councils on developmental disabilities, and many state agency advisory bodies. These parent leaders also sit on local committees (such as the Committees on Special Education/ Preschool Special Education and the Local Early Intervention Coordinating Councils), and have written grants to establish their own agencies to provide services to people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Participants in Partners in Policy Making come from diverse social, economic, regional, and cultural backgrounds. What unites them is their common interest in the well-being and happiness of their children. One participant said: "One of the most frustrating things I have faced as a parent is that sometimes-overwhelming feeling of helplessness when it comes to my child's disability. Partners in Policy Making has helped me get a real sense that I can do something constructive for my child, for other children, for other parents, and for myself."

Sally Mehrtens is a graduate student at the Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at the University of Albany, State University of New York, and is working on an internship with Developmental Disabilities Planning Council. Anna Lobosco and Carol Nash are Program Planners with the DDPC.

For more information on Partners in Policy Making training, contact Shirley Reynolds, New York DDPC, 155 Washington Avenue, 2nd Floor, Albany, NY 12210, 518/432- 8233 or 800/395- 3372.

Getting Involved in State-Level Planning

One Parent Walks the Long, Rocky Road of Collaboration

by Carmen Siberon

I am the parent of two biological sons, three foster sons and two step daughters. For the last two years I have been a parent representative in the federal Family Preservation and Support Services Program (FPSSP), the federal initiative that involves parents and the public, private and business sectors of the communities in planning services and support for families and children. I was motivated to get involved in the FPSSP work group convened in my region, southwest Connecticut, because I know the human service delivery system both as a parent and as a social services professional. I have come to see that this system as it is currently funded and structured cannot serve families effectively today; what worked when there were plenty of jobs for high school graduates and when the minimum wage was enough to meet a family's basic needs does not work now.

Our work group was charged with assessing the priorities of social services recipients in our region. We began by administering a survey to parents through community agencies and public housing projects. About 500 individuals responded; they listed food, housing, jobs, a nurturing family and community, and access to services as their top five priorities. At this point we faced a couple of major challenges. First, our schedule for allocating the funds was nearly impossible to meet. Second, there was some disagreement among group members over how the money should be used. Some argued that the social service delivery system should not and could not deal with the basic needs of children and families identified by the consumers. They argued that mental health problems and substance abuse were the kinds of issues that needed to be addressed. Others felt that these problems often arose because basic needs are not met. Talk about a "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" discussion. In the end, our commitment to responding to consumers led us to fund a job readiness and training program for adults and two summer youth employment programs.

Combining Leadership and Collaboration: The Challenges

Connecticut's Department of Children and Families, like the departments of protective services in other states, has been designated as the lead agency for organizing and funding the plans that regional work groups like ours developed for the FPSSP. The other state and community agencies and business people are at the table cooperating and collaborating, but advancing their input beyond the scope of the specific initiative in which they are collaborating is an ongoing challenge: imagine how the goals of the collaboration would be advanced if they were integrated into the agenices, businesses, and communities in which these people work and live every day.

In general, initiatives that call for collaborative governance and shared ownership of problems and solutions usually appoint a lead agency. But from my experience, these established service delivery structures act as a barrier to producing systems change, rather than being a means of change. It is extremely difficult for both a collaborative governance body and a lead agency to be true to their purposes. The notion of collaboration and people working together is a start, but the goal of systems reform continues to be elusive.

Another challenge presented by collaborative systems reform has to do with "parent involvement." At a recent meeting on parent involvement, the keynote speaker asked "How many of you are parents?" I saw many of the family-serving professionals who are also parents raise their hands. Why, then, the special effort to achieve parent involvement? While I am a "parent representative" in our regional work group, I am not the only parent in the group: others, who act as representatives of agencies and businesses, are also parents. The factors that distinguish me from other group members are that my participation is strictly as a volunteer (although a stipend covers the expenses I incur to attend meetings) and that therefore I am supposed to be at more liberty to represent my personal views as a parent and the personal views of other parents. I attend these meetings on my own time, not as an employee of a given agency or institution.

Early in the group's work to assess consumers' needs and formulate a plan to meet those needs, the question of who is a parent and/or consumer surfaced, but it was never quite resolved. I think this is because answering that question involves drawing the "us-and-them" distinction that we work so hard to overcome. If we become clear about what we mean when we speak of "parents," then we can be clear about defining their roles and expectations regarding their involvement and how in fact it is different from that of a professional. In the human services network, "parent" seems to mean someone who is not only legally responsible for children under the age of 18, but who more often than not finds herself or himself at the receiving end of government-funded health care, education, services, and monetary and social support for poor and minority children and families. While many children in this country are experiencing hardships and are in need of a comprehensive service delivery system to address their needs, these needs are most pressing in poor and minority communities. The lack of parent involvement in planning services is also most pressing in these communities. If what is needed to effectively reform our family-serving systems is the input of parents from poor and minority communities, why not put that on the table? I believe that an honest discussion and answer to this question will help us get a bit closer to the systems reform we all hope for.

Those working in the service delivery system are doing their best given the system's structure and history. Collaboration and parent involvement are important beginnings. However, these strategies as they are currently practiced fail to address the inability of the existing service delivery system to meet families' needs. Today, even capable, motivated youths and heads of households contend with not only in the economy, but with the government-sponsored systems and programs that are intended to help them deal with it.

Carmen Siberon is former Director of Case Management for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative. She can be reached at 49 Meadow Brook Drive, Monroe, CT, 06468, 203/268-5724 (phone), 203/459-8478 (fax).

Using Computers to Build Local Community

Newark Residents are Turning MUSIC into Health and Education

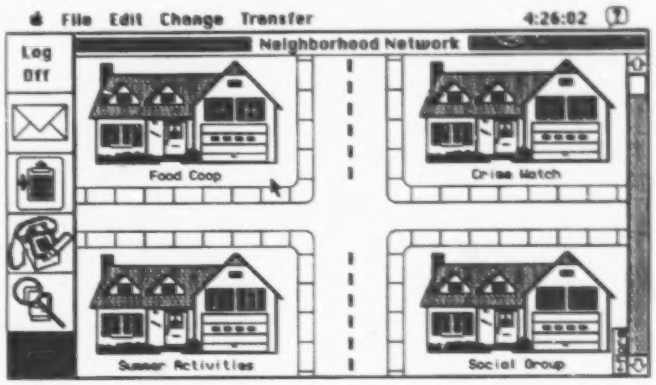
by Pamela Morgan

Discussions about information technology usually focus on how it can give people access to resources and programs that are not a part of their local communities: the global village, not the local village. But many of the most devastating, persistent problems people face have to do with local issues: crime, abuse, fear of and alienation from their own neighbors, who are often children and youth.

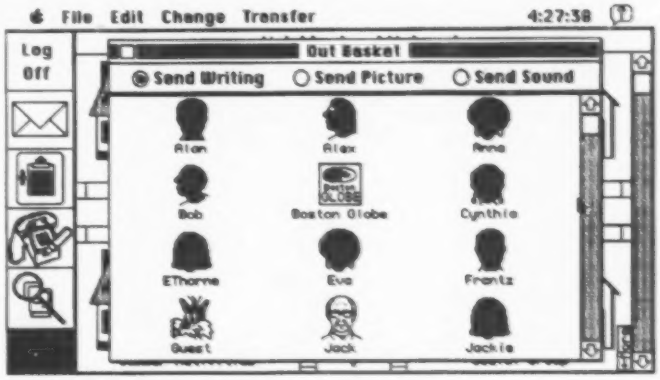
MUSIC, a computer networking system, helps users build their communities by making information technology local, social, and easy to use. Part of a project called Linking Up Villages, MUSIC (which stands for Multi-User Sessions In Community) uses text, graphics, digitized voice, and speech synthesis to bring together members of real local communities, rather than virtual ones. By placing terminals in homes, churches, community centers, health centers, and educational institutions, MUSIC models how infrastructure can be advanced by information technologies in neighborhoods just as it is globally.

Newark Parents Harness Technology's Power

Newton Street Elementary School is in the middle of an area that gained national attention in 1967 during the civil insurrection that is commonly referred to as the Newark riots. During the late 1960s and early 1970s much of the housing was destroyed. In the late 1970s the New Community Corporation, a community-based, not-for profit organization, moved in and began providing housing (700 units), job training, and social services for all of Newark. Over 85 per cent of the Newton Street Elementary School population lives in New Community housing. The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) is directly across the street from the school.



MUSIC's Graphical User Interface



Icons for outgoing mail on MUSIC

Now, computers in Newton Street Elementary School and in neighborhood homes, social service offices, the public library, the central office of Newark Public Schools, a church, and the University of Medicine and Dentistry are linked via modem to a community bulletin board system on a network server. MUSIC lets users communicate in a number of ways. General information that is for the common good of the community is broadcast through general postings. E-mail is used for private communications. If two participants are on-line at the same time and need to discuss an issue, they can "chat." And discussion groups allow participants to work through issues that they feel need to be addressed. The system hardware includes Macintosh LC 550 computers, a Quadra 950 file server, and 14,400-baud modems.

Turning Information "Have-Nots" into "Haves"

MUSIC is addressing a critical lack of access to information technology among a large and crucial population: those without access to government, commercial, and educational institutions, which are swiftly going on-line. Without efforts to increase access to information technology, they become a population of information "have-nots."

Access to information technology is not only an issue of providing more machinery to those who are marginalized. This technology must be made to be relevant, easy to use, and inviting to those who have the most difficult time making their voices heard in our country. Otherwise, fear, apathy, and ignorance may keep all of the benefits of this technology from those who could make use of it to empower themselves.

MUSIC allows users to "go" to "buildings" (Newton Street School, UMDNJ, New Community Corporation, Discussion Groups, and Social Activities) and "rooms" within them (those who "go" to the school can choose the computer lab, the principal's office, Kids' Corner, or Parental Involvement). Each room offers

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participants text, graphics, and sound as ways to communicate. The messages are usually responded to within 24 hours.

In the future, MUSIC will allow users to log on without modems by using touch-tone phones. MUSIC can handle on-line voting, surveying, and polling. Special rooms facilitate news publications. A special graphical map database/directory room allows users to get information about another resident or organization by simply clicking on a street name or organizational grouping name.

Community Collaborates to Make MUSIC

Continuous collaboration has been a main ingredient of the project's success. The Newton Street School administration, the Office of Computer Education and Technology of the Newark Public Schools, the New Community Corporation, and the office of the dean at the New Jersey Medical School work together. Representatives from those institutions and from the office of the Provost of Rutgers, the State University, the Newark Public Library, the Star Ledger newspaper, the AT&T Alliance of Black Telecommunications Employees, and other interested community members make up an advisory board that meets quarterly to review and advise on program progress and offer resources to support the project.

MUSIC also helps parents become involved in their children's education. Parents contact Newton Street Elementary School principal Willie Thomas on-line to get information or just to "talk." He has included many of the MUSIC participants in his school-based planning teams. Long viewed by youths in the community as a father figure, Thomas is now viewed as "one of the family" by MUSIC parents and their family members.

The Sound of MUSIC in Newark

Many residents, although they live near the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, have not used the institution's resources. MUSIC is helping to build the relationship between residents and medical personnel to help residents develop healthy lifestyles and seek medical help in times of illness, rather than using the emergency room as the source of primary care. Through MUSIC, community members receive educational and preventative information from doctors on-line. They also communicate with New Community social service providers on-line.

Residents develop many activities and events through on-line communication. Residents have planned and carried out flea markets, a community talent show, holiday and birthday celebrations, and a splash party for children. As part of a community-based photography class, students captured their community on film and then developed the prints. Residents are now preparing to exhibit the photographs on the World Wide Web (look for them soon at http://mmassey.www.media.mit/edu/people/mmassey/MUSICintro.html). A security watch program has also been initiated. Residents are working with the Newark Police Department and the New Community security force to develop strategies to combat crime in their community.

Teachers and parents are now in the process of refining scholastic content on the program. On-line discussion groups (Circle of Sisters, Circle of Brothers, About AIDS, Parenting and Housekeeping) are particularly popular because participants can use them to meet informally and work through important issues that are confronting them.

How Did They Do It?

In spring 1994 the Office of Computer Education and Technology of the Newark Public Schools applied for a Telecommunications Information Infrastructure Assistance Program grant from the National Telecommunications Information Agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce. They received $106,950 to install a community computer network that aimed to:

1. Raise student achievement by improving the delivery of primary health care; and

2. Improve the quality of life for community residents.

Interviews and surveys began in January 1995 and resulted in 15 community members becoming participants or "captains." To be a captain, a community member must:

1. Have a child at Newton Street Elementary school;

2. Live in New Community housing;

3. Complete a series of training sessions; and

4. Allow at least four people from outside his or her immediate families access to the computer placed in his or her home.

Captains spent two intense days analyzing community needs and developing strategies to meet those needs. They developed and signed a contract that stated their responsibility to the program and to the community, participants' expectations, indicators that would show the program's success, and ways the program could be a tool for empowerment to improve the quality of life in their neighborhood. The preface reads:

"Once the community creates a bond, the quality of life will improve and give hope to many families that life will be better. It starts with one victory! Where once we knocked on doors and they were closed, now, we will get them opened."

Computer-focused training brought parents and children together to learn to use the Macintosh computer. After they had successfully completed the training activities, a community celebration served as the program's kick-off. Ongoing training keeps community members involved and learning; approximately 80 percent of participants have never before used a computer or related technology.

In addition to Newark, MUSIC has been successfully used in inner-city Boston. Work is in progress to implement MUSIC in educational and community development programs in other areas of the country.

Pamela Morgan is a curriculum specialist for the Newark Public Schools, and has been a public school educator since 1972. She has been active in educational technology since 1985.

MUSIC was developed by Dr. Alan Shaw at the MIT Media Laboratory. For more information on MUSIC, contact Alan or Michelle Shaw, 33 Algonquin Street, Dorchester, MA 02124, 617/436-8048 (phone), or via e-mail at: acs@media.mit.edu or MichelleAS @aol.com

Parent Network Empowers a Community

by Beverly Bell, Jr.

Keith Strickland

Three years ago seven parents came together to empower their community—the low-income, mostly African American East End of Richmond, Virginia—by forming the Parent Resource Network. As Senior Parent Coordinator, I work with these parents to sustain a resource and support network that educates parents, children, families, agencies, and organizations so that they can collaborate on family-centered reform in health, education, juvenile justice, and welfare systems.

Much of our work is about building connections. By doing this and empowering parents to get involved, the Parent Resource Network works to decrease crime, increase communication between neighborhoods, increase participation of parents, improve communication between parents and youth-serving agencies including schools and mental health agencies, involve parents in planning and policy making, educate and unify the community, promote respect, reduce school dropout rates, educate parents, and identify and assess community strengths.

Through information sharing, the network hopes to effect positive change that creates interpersonal growth; bonding among families, the community, and schools; and development of many kinds. The network gets parents more involved in the City of Richmond's Youth and Family Support Programs. The Neighborhood Coordinators are volunteers who lead the Network's activities and convene parent groups in the Chimborazo, Creighton, Fairfield, Fulton, Mosby, St. John, and Whitcomb neighborhoods. In these groups, community members raise, prioritize, and address issues and concerns by helping each other find the necessary resources to handle problems.

I got involved a year after the Network had formed. One of the requirements in getting the job was that I be a member of the East End community; I had been very active here, working with youth as a mentor and coordinating youth activities, and was familiar with the issues of community residents. I was chosen by a committee that included community folks, the president of the tenant association, other parents involved in the Network, and a minister.

Because we live in the community, the Neighborhood Coordinators and I do a lot of our work informally. I'll go to the grocery store, and run into someone who needs to talk about a problem or has some resources to offer, and my grocery shopping turns into an informal meeting. Or a parent will flag me down as I drive down the street because there's some trouble, their child has been shot, and that will be an informal meeting.

Through the Network, parents help each other access substance abuse treatment and counseling, employment services, and emergency food (both by referring them to churches and by providing money for food). We have started neighborhood patrols and neighborhood watches to deter crime. The many ways in which parents have been involved have affirmed their value in the community. They have done all of this without formal training; now parents are seeking training to stretch their possibilities even further.

Progress Takes Patience

Our neighborhoods face a lot of challenges, and crises often come up that temporarily slow our progress in making the community stronger. Parental substance abuse and physical abuse in particular have created stress for families. It is important that we encourage each other to follow through in solving problems, such as getting treatment and counselling. Twenty-three percent of our community members receive public assistance, and 38 percent are below the poverty line.

We are making progress. Especially with the possibility of welfare reform, we've been building residents' employment capacity: locating jobs and helping people get into and follow through on job training, and GED preparation.

This summer we got a building to use for services and programs for children, youths, and families, and are now assessing what the community wants to use it for. We also have pulled together a wide range of people who work with families to start collaborating at monthly meetings. These people have committed to coordinating their

actions and resources for the upcoming year.

Parent-Empowering Principles Guide Network

Several steps have been essential to our success: respect for each other; accessibility; building trust; establishing sincere relationships with parents, children, and families; meeting everyone at their own level, regardless of religion, education, economic, or social standing; honesty; open communication; inclusion in decision making, planning, and organizing; and reinforcing everyone's uniqueness.

The Parent Resource Network sees all persons, settings, and events as resources for development. Participants in the network view all persons, irrespective of role or social status, as potential sources of support and possessors of competencies. Network Coordinators approach these potential resources by organizing parent support groups in the community. In some cases, parent support groups have been organized in the area schools to pursue the goal of parent-led problem solving and to increase parental involvement in children's education. Parent groups utilize different community activities to share information, including tenant council meetings, civic organization meetings, community days, and rallies. These events provide another avenue for parents to socialize and discuss issues, concerns, opinions, anxieties, and aspirations for the future. They also allow individuals to provide resources to each other, which has helped to bring about a sense of togetherness, social support, and self-direction. The Parent Resource Network events also provide an opportunity for individuals to be creative in developing and sharing resources.

The Network Works

The Parent Resource Network has come to be looked upon as the helping hands of the seven communities in which it exists and of the East End larger community. Individual parents' homes have become places of respite and safe-houses for families and parents; they are the place in which family and community crises are handled.

Parents are working in collaboration with Spectrum/Family First, a community-based organization, to organize a kids' day for dads in each of the public housing developments. The network has been working with other parent groups in the community. Also the Parent Resource Network is organizing 80 volunteers to participate in the annual East End Back to School rally. The parents have been advocating to bring child development activities, provided by the Garfield F. Childs organization, into the community. One Network Coordinator is trying to organize a Narcotics Anonymous group in her community in response to a substance abuse epidemic among mothers there. Another is working to secure Bibles for a minister in the community who has been working with children and has had no outside support.

Through the Parent Resource Network parents have helped each other access substance abuse treatment and counseling, employment services, and emergency food. They have started neighborhood patrols and neighborhood watches to deter crime.

Each parent has brought to the Parent Resource Network skills in parenting, adapting to situations, and other areas, as well as compassion and the desire to change systems. They have been advisors to committees, boards, civic organizations, and schools. Each parent has moved from a place of dependence to one of interdependence, and has set goals and made strides to attain those goals. This has spilled over to other parents, motivating them toward individual development, family development, and community consciousness. In providing the numerous services, parents have realized that there is a definite need for training so that they can increase the quality and effectiveness of the services they provide and enhance their own personal development.

How Do Parents Get Involved?

Neighborhood Coordinators widely publicize monthly neighborhood meetings to discuss working together to make the community better. At the meetings, attendees learn about programs going on in the neighborhood, such as the Youth and Family Support Programs that are sponsored by the City of Richmond, and are invited to become part of a community team so that they can have input into these programs and have opportunities to further their own educational and emotional development. Network Coordinators are responsible for bringing their own resources to share with the other parents. Each works with one parent to orient him or her to the work of coordinating the Network. The Parent Resource Network also holds community-wide meetings monthly. The location rotates from one neighborhood to another.

During this entire empowerment process, those involved in the Parent Resource Network have had to be mindful of egos and personalities to continuously work toward a balance and reinforce each person's uniqueness and competencies.

The impact of the Parent Resource Network has been felt by each parent coordinator, individually, collectively, and community-wide. Despite the obstacles that individuals and the whole network have encountered, the development of parents, families, and the community increases.

Beverly Bell, Jr., is Senior Parent Coordinator for the Parent Resource Network, 701 N. 25th Street, Richmond, VA 23223, 804/780-4567. All work of the Parent Resource Network is a collaboration among Bell and Neighborhood Coordinators Richetta Pointdexter, Annie Giles, Dianna Herndon, Wincey Hobson, Joyce Kenny, Cynthia Lomex, and Valier Muhammad.

Houston Family Advocacy Network Is Parents' Vehicle for Change

FAN Members Speak

Research and experience show that the family plays the single most critical role in determining a child's future. The Family Advocacy Network (FAN) is helping to ensure that public services support families in that role. Formed to facilitate parent input into the Annie E. Casey Mental Health Initiative in Houston, Texas, FAN enables parents to be advocates for their families. In FAN, parents find an environment in which they can work with service providers and legislators in planning and governance.

FAN coordinates parent efforts to advocate for family-friendly change in public policies and systems. Parents meet with service providers and program and government agency administrators so that together they can plan for family-focused programs and systems. FAN staff also facilitate the integration of public sources of support so that families can make the most of them. It keeps families from "falling through cracks" between different public services and helps them find ways to meet their needs.

The Annie E. Casey Mental Health Initiative is in place in four communities nationwide; in 1993, after responding to a request for proposals, the third ward of Houston was chosen by the governor to be the urban site for the Initiative. As the final year of the Annie E. Casey Mental Health Initiative draws to a close, those involved in the Initiative in Houston have formed a non-profit organization called People In Partnership and are seeking funding to continue their work. Below, FAN members and staff tell their story.

Edwoodie Mathis

Member, Family Advocacy Network

When I came on board, I was looking for somebody to advocate for me. I had tried everywhere and talked to every kind of agency, trying to get some help for my children. While all this was going on, I was working with the governing board and we were planning ways to improve the outcomes for [our] children. It was a long, hard struggle, [but] we did lots of things to bring people together, trying to draw [them] together so they could get the information we had to give them. We had to get together and lay some foundation work, set some parameters, clarify goals. I'm still working with the governing board and the Family Advocacy Network. I hold [FAN] in high regard because they are the [ones] who actually step out into the neighborhood and get in touch with the people: talk to them, convince them, help them to gain access to the services that are offered. It's people like [FAN] that encouraged me, have inspired me to stick to it, go ahead with it although I didn't see any way out or any [likely] outcome. So the Family Advocacy Network is like my best friend.

Cedric Johnson

Parent Coordinator, Annie E. Casey Mental Health Initiative

Staff Member, Family Advocacy Network

There is not enough appreciation of the problems facing disadvantaged children and the consequences of these problems for all communities. The systems and services designed to serve children and families are so poorly understood that there is little meaningful public debate about their quality, efficiency, and management, and there is very little, if any, accountability.

During the planning stage of the Annie E. Casey Mental Health Initiative in Houston's third ward, an assessment was conducted to determine the mental health and human services needs of the community's children and families. The committee that conducted the assessment, and began the planning that followed, consisted mostly of service providers. It became apparent that the inclusion and participation of families was being neglected. A decision was then made to separate the committee into two entities, one of which was the Family Advocacy Network or FAN.

FAN works to ensure that the Initiative keeps children and their families as the focus of its efforts by working with other stakeholders in the community (such as business people, providers of services and programs, and educators), committees, and state- and local-level task forces. We develop policies and service delivery procedures and take other actions to demonstrate our conviction that children can and should have better futures.

The Family Advocacy Network hopes to bring about awareness of these concerns and family participation in solutions that address them. As family resource centers become established in our community, we expect to have a meaningful role in managing them.

Eugenia Okwu

Secretary, Family Advocacy Network

I was always a strong advocate for my family, friends, and neighbors, but didn't realize it until I started working with FAN. It is a good feeling when I assist someone in cutting through the red tape. Working with this group has strengthened my capabilities. I have learned a lot about advocating for my rights through the different agencies. FAN has become recognized for letting the agencies know what the average citizen of this community is looking for in services, not what someone [else] thinks we need.

I guess you could say [my family] is an empowered family due to our connection to FAN. My daughter has benefited greatly from being a member of this group. It has helped her in school and sports, with her communication skills, and [dealing with] the public in general. She also helps her fellow schoolmates by advising them. My sister was the greatest influence for both of us. She was chosen to be the Chair of FAN and is our strongest FAN asset. [Our] being involved with FAN has also empowered our adult children.

D'Onice Renchie-Syon

Chair, Family Advocacy Network

I know sometimes people want to see a change, and they want to see it fast. But it takes time for some things to change. I say to anyone working with the Initiative: Understand when it is time for us to make changes in the big picture that we all want to see happen. [Understand when it is time] to make moves that would encourage the community to keep supporting these efforts. We can volunteer our time, but we still need more support from our state and city partners—all of the partners we have in our midst—if we are going to [serve] families.

Nikita Wilson

Co-Chair, Family Advocacy Network

Although inclusion efforts are extremely taxing, they are fundamental to the success of collaboration. [When the Family Advocacy Network was first formed], as FAN struggled to provide input to the decision-makers for this initiative, I was amazed at how information that was sent [to these decision makers] for consideration in this consensus process was diluted, convoluted, and just plain misinterpreted. So I became a VISTA worker on the project to try and discern where and how the communication break-downs were occurring. It became quite clear that in collaborative partnerships, there is an inherent chaos in attempting to be all-inclusive of all levels of the community. The organizational efforts are monumental and constantly in need of modification.

Stick with it if you are involved in family empowerment. Bureaucracy does throw up all kinds of roadblocks to changing the way things are done, to discourage rattling their cages. But consumers of services must be heard; their input is vital. People are not prone to use plans made for them without their input.

FAN can be reached at Frederick Douglass Family Resource Center, 3000 Trulley, Houston, TX 77004, 713/659-8630 (phone), 713/659-3821 (fax).

Community Involvement in Program Decision Making

by Bryan Samuels and Tony Markward

Most people working and participating in family support programs believe that the involvement of community residents is crucial to the legitimacy and success of both programs and communities, especially where there has been a history of disenfranchisement. But when we start to try to address community involvement through strategic planning, difficult questions arise. "Which community members should we involve? What function will community involvement serve in our program and community? And what exactly do we mean by 'involve,' anyway?"

The first step programs can take to plan for community involvement is to examine all of their options. In general, people view community involvement as residents taking part in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, resources are allocated, and programs are operated and evaluated. Family support professionals often say that community involvement means empowering residents and increasing community ownership of programs: by having power to determine what programs do and how they are operated, residents are more likely to get what they need. So community involvement can be defined as a redistribution of power and responsibility that gives residents a significant role in decision making and governing.

Programs generally make sincere efforts to involve residents and consumers in ways that are beneficial to both programs and participants, but because they do not think strategically about involvement, very few manage to rise to their vision as it is described above. Other common reasons that programs have trouble attaining that vision are:

1. A natural reluctance on the part of professionals to believe that they do not always know best for their programs,
2. A lack of understanding that influence can be shared with residents on more than one level, and
3. A mismatch between the amount of influence programs want to share with residents and the types of involvement that are made available to residents.

In the real world of family-supportive practice, community governance of a program is a matter of degrees rather than a distinction drawn in black and white. Community members can be involved in a family support program or center at a number of different levels, all of which have different costs, consequences, and benefits for the program, for the citizens who commit their time and other resources to get involved, and for the community as a whole. In the most effective family support programs and centers, a broad range of community residents are encouraged to participate in the planning, development, implementation, evaluation, and governance of programs and centers, and participation is understood to involve a degree of influence over the decisions made at the different stages in the life of the program.

The framework suggested in this article, which we have termed the "Community Involvement Stairway" (see diagram, pages 18–19), was developed to help program staff, participants, planners, and administrators determine:

1. Their goals concerning community involvement (including their vision of how much authority should be shared with residents),
2. The techniques and methods they can use to meet these goals, and
3. The types and amounts of commitment, responsibility, and skills that they are asking community residents to contribute.

What Community Involvement Looks Like

We have identified six levels or steps that make up the theoretical community involvement stairway.

Step 1: Informal Roles

This step encompasses a wide range of roles that residents can fulfill in family support programs without exercising formal authority over how programs are run. These roles are often essential to program operation and provide important opportunities for residents to connect with programs, but do not contribute to the ability of a community to share in making decisions. They allow information and power to flow in one direction, from program staff and governance bodies to community residents.

The main influence that residents in these roles wield over a program is their ability to grant or not grant it the credibility it needs to be effective in the community. Vehicles for involving residents in non-governance roles include town hall meetings, open houses, testimonies, public presentations, and grand openings. These activities build upon the skills and rely on the relationships that a small number of residents already have. In some situations the amount of time spent on these activities is limited and takes place just during the initial stages of the program, when it is still trying to establish itself; in other cases, residents devote many hours to outreach efforts and remain involved for the life of the program. Community recruits are enlisted or hired to promote the program because they can identify with potential consumers and effectively communicate the value of the program. New programs often ask community leaders, activists, religious leaders, and educators to sponsor events that serve the purpose of "marketing" the program in the community.

Step 2: Consultation

When residents act as consultants, they are invited to express their opinions, expectations, and preferences before decisions are made on important issues like program design and implementation strategies. Residents provide insight into why a particular program is needed, why some programs have failed, and what steps can be taken to improve programs. While information flows mostly from resident to program, the power rests primarily with the program. Sometimes these consultation structures are established in order to fulfill a grant requirement or public law. In many situations, resident participation is measured quantitatively (by how many individuals attend meetings, donate time, bring friends to meetings, and complete surveys), but not qualitatively. Programs value the information and advice they obtain through consultation, but are not required to act on it. This may be the most common level at which programs currently involve residents.

Resident input is sought through steering committees, advisory boards, and neighborhood or tenant councils. Residents also

may be program evaluators, grant reviewers, reviewers of audiovisual and written materials, members of the orientation committee for new staff, paid consultants, and advisors in the process of assessing the community's needs.

Residents are asked to spend a modest amount of time and energy on preparation, attend regularly scheduled meetings, and co-host community meetings. Consultation typically consumes between one day a month and one day per quarter of residents' time, but paid advocates can work on a regular daily or weekly schedule.

Step 3: Representation

At this level on the community involvement stairway, residents act as the recognized "voice" of the community. Usually, a small number of residents are selected and given an official role in making decisions within the larger circle of stakeholders. Each resident has the same voting power as each stakeholder, but residents are very much in the minority. During the initial stages of the decision-making process, when many important decisions are made, residents' participation is often diminished because most are uncomfortable speaking for the community.

Resident representatives are often expected to:

1. Build understanding of and support for the program in the community,
2. Offer a forum in which other residents are comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns,
3. Mediate disputes between residents and stakeholders, and
4. Identify opportunities for achieving greater "buy-in" from the community.

Common mechanisms for representation include boards of trustees, citizen review boards, collaborative governance bodies, and task forces.

Because the resident is accountable to both the organization of which he or she is a representative and the community whose interests he or she is expected to promote, this role can take a considerable amount of dedication and time (between two and four days a month).

Step 4: Partnership

At this level, the vision of community involvement in family support begins to match the reality. Decision-making power is distributed between community residents and stakeholders/program staff so that each shares responsibility for planning, decision making, and accountability. Participants have the power to make changes in the structure or content of the program if it fails to meet their needs, and they are privy to all information so that they can make informed decisions. In the formal decision-making process, residents hold 50 percent of the votes.

While residents serving at the representation level express opinions that are not necessarily acted upon when other stakeholders make the final decisions, residents in the equal partnerships that characterize this step help forge final decisions and, with their voting power, can require other stakeholders to compromise. At the partnership level, participating residents are accountable to two groups: the partnership's stakeholders and community residents.

Residents involved in a partnership are expected to:

1. Build families' capacity to become self-sufficient,
2. Build the community's capacity to meet the needs of residents,
3. Provide a forum for the community to share its concerns,
4. Mediate disputes among all individuals and organizations involved in the program,
5. Build broader community understanding of the program, and
6. Identify the unmet needs of families.

The structures and mechanisms commonly used in partnerships include family resource centers, boards of directors, joint planning boards, appointed commissions, and some collaborative bodies. All of these structures require that residents and other stakeholders come together as a team. Each resident must feel valued and respected, and each is assumed to be competent to decide what is in the best interests of the community and to be capable of mastering new skills. The agenda must be set within the partnership and not from the outside.

The amount of time a resident must commit to a partnership depends on whether he or she is a program participant, organizer, decision maker, or paid employee. The time invested by program participants may be ongoing but not intensive. Organizers and decision makers often contribute about five days a month, and paid employees can work up to full time.

Step 5: Leadership

The leadership level of community involvement is achieved when residents become the dominant force in planning, implementation, and governance, and have the power to pursue what they believe to be in the best interests of the community. This level can be successful only when the terms of the leadership have been negotiated among the community, the program, and officials and funders from the public and private sectors (of course, the lines of distinction among the parties blurs as community involvement progresses). At this level on the stairway, it is primarily community residents who are accountable for the success or failure of the program.

The leadership role requires participating residents to:

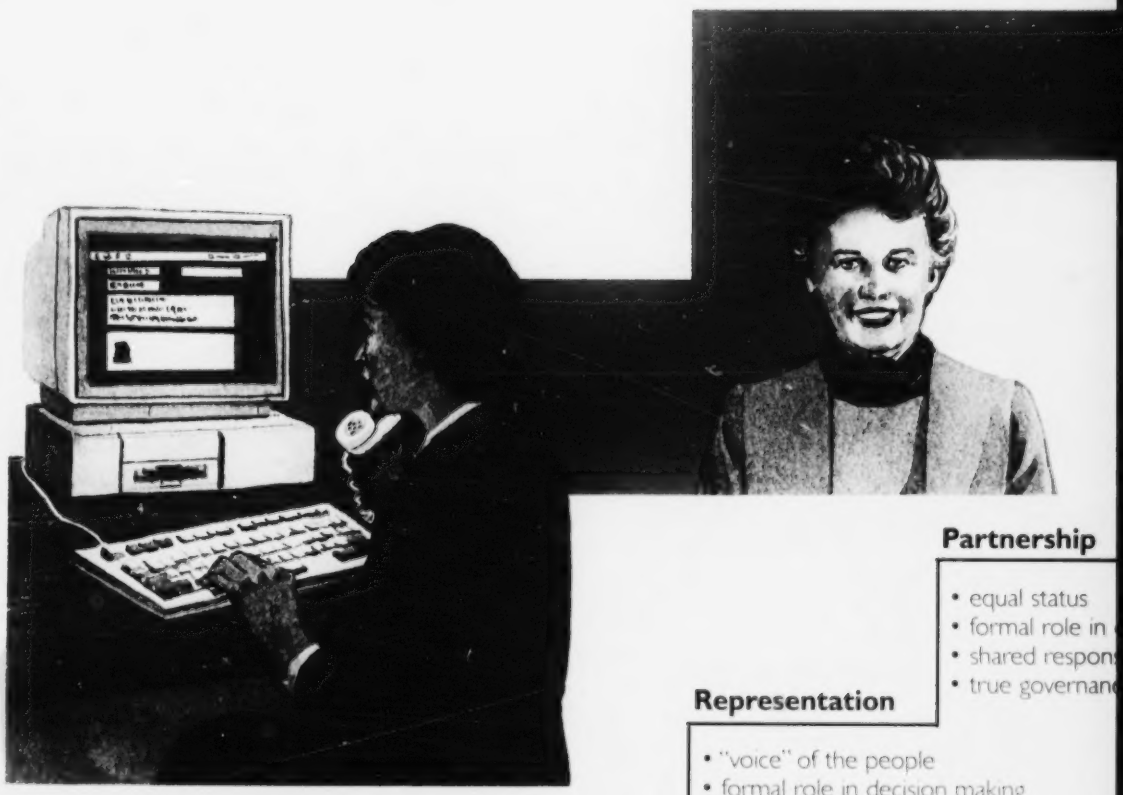
1. Provide broad oversight and direction,
2. Have a firm understanding of the program's operations,
3. Provide a forum for the community to share its concerns,
4. Mediate disputes among all individuals and organizations involved,
5. Build broader community understanding of the program,
6. Identify unmet needs of families,
7. Set goals and benchmarks and measure outcomes, and
8. Evaluate the success of the program.

Residents' responsibilities are selected so that they build on strengths, and residents must have the latitude to determine how the work gets done. Early on, the residents will need to spend a lot of time establishing formal decision-making protocols and procedures. They also may formulate a statement describing significant powers that have been delegated and to whom they have been assigned. In these structures, residents are appointed by funders or elected by the community.

In some cities and states, leadership structures such as local planning entities have received funding to plan and/or operate neighborhood programs.

At this level, a core set of community residents and leaders usually is hired half to full time and commits six months to a

Community Involv



Community Control

Levels of Influence

Partnership

- equal status
- formal role in
- shared respons
- true governan

Representation

- "voice" of the people
- formal role in decision making
- build bridges

Consultation

- advise before decision made
- fulfill requirements
- new perspective
- collect information from residents

Informal Roles

- programmatic work
- outreach
- consumer reaction
- create demand
- establish credibility

Agency Control

Levels of Invo

ement Stairway

Community Governance

- elected by the community
- full accountability
- selected by funder

Leadership

- dominant voice
- primary responsibility
- resource allocation
- accountable to funders/community

ecision-making
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role

vement

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year of time. In some cases, their positions become permanent.

Step 6: Community Governance

At the community governance level, only residents are accountable to the community and to funders for all decisions and results. Residents have complete control over the program, policies, and the allocation of resources. In this scenario, residents hold the authority that outside stakeholders in the non-community governance scenario hold. While they may ask for the input of others from outside the community, such as professionals, businesspersons, or residents who have been involved in similar efforts, residents control the flow of information. Community governance is often cited as the utopia of community involvement. Indeed, it may exist only as a goal or vision; we do not know of a program that has reached this level.

True community program governance is a pure form of empowerment. It is more responsive to the needs of both the family as a whole and individual family members than governance mechanisms that involve outside stakeholders and professionals. It encourages the flow of resources to families in ways that are flexible, individualized, and responsive to changing needs.

Residents perform many of the same functions in community governance as they do in leadership. At this level of involvement, a strong, more formal staff structure that includes several community residents full time and part time is necessary, and advisory boards and boards of directors are likely to be established. For residents involved at this level, the time commitment is significant and may be overwhelming.

Conclusions

The ascending nature of the stairway described above implies that the higher the level at which a program involves its community, the better the program. But when resident involvement is put into practice, it is more aptly described as a set of points on a continuum than as steps on a stairway.

One could say that the nirvana of community involvement is the community's total governance of the programs that serve it. Of course it is desirable to achieve this highest level of involvement, but at the very least, programs wishing to call themselves "community-based" and "empowering" must strive to achieve the partnership step. While most of us could name several programs that do not grant residents any true decision-making authority (partnership-level involvement or above) and are still effective, it is fair to say that these programs would enhance their other strengths if they gave more community members decision-making roles.

Also, providing residents a single mechanism for participating at the partnership level or above is not enough. Programs need to provide a range of opportunities for residents at all levels on the stairway. Because the demands on residents are different at each level, residents with different motivations, personalities, and skills will be attracted to different levels and different roles within those levels.

Next Steps

Much more needs to be understood before we truly comprehend the process and outcomes of community involvement. You probably have your own ideas about what is missing from the stairway. Here are two of ours: First, the stairway reflects the supply of opportunities available to residents, but not the demand; it captures only the range of governance-related opportunities typically made available to residents, not necessarily the opportunities in which residents are most interested. Now we have only the broadest notions of what motivates residents to participate in efforts to improve their communities and what repels them. We need to make an effort to ask residents, including those who are not already involved in a community-based program, what results they hope to achieve from involvement. Second, the model does not represent the whole range of ways in which a resident can connect with a program without being granted official influence over its direction: as a volunteer, a staff member, and as a participant, as well as in many less formal ways.

Achieving the full potential of community involvement in family support programs will occur only when we can match the full range of opportunities for resident involvement with residents' many degrees and sources of motivation to be involved.

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Becoming a Board Member: A Parent's Story

Jewell Cody, a divorced single mother, is secretary of the Executive Board of the Center for Parent and Neighborhood Involvement in New Haven, Connecticut.

In a city where 50 percent of the children live in poverty, parents are developing, designing, creating, and managing their own child- and family-serving programs. The Center's workshops and models allow parents to develop the skills and knowledge they need to advocate for effective services and control their own resources.

The Center for Parent and Neighborhood Involvement attempts to spread the message in communities that prevention is important, and to help them organize to advocate for family resource centers; it also offers a parents a way to network with each other about their neighborhoods and their personal concerns. The New Haven Family Alliance founded the Center after learning from earlier experiences that in order for family resource centers to be successful, they must spring from communities' own desires and initiative and be the result of community members' leadership. The Alliance provides administrative support to the parents involved in the Center, which is currently funded by the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven and the William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund.

For more information, contact the Center for Parent and Neighborhood Involvement, 25 Science Park, Box 34, New Haven, CT 06511, 203/786-5970 (phone), 203/786-5974 (fax).

FRC: How did you get involved with the Center for Parent and Neighborhood Involvement?

Jewell Cody: I became involved because I was an Aspira/Americorps member. Americorps is like the Peace Corps, but it is based in the United States, and Aspira is a regional Latino youth organization. I wanted to volunteer to help improve my community, and they placed me in a community service job. But I had transporation difficulties couldn't complete my last 40 hours at the job, which was in Bridgeport. My Americorps coordinator, who had worked with Mustafa Abdul-Salaam [former New Haven Family Alliance Executive Director and current FRC board member] in a group working on youth issues, arranged with him for me to complete my assignment at the Center for Parent and Neighborhood Involvement, which I could get to without my car.

I volunteered with Amelia Hills, an outreach worker at the Center. She was in the work group convened in our region to plan for the federal Family Preservation and Support Services Program (FPSSP). I helped process responses to the request for proposals for the child abuse prevention grant issued by the Connecticut Department of Children and Family Services (DCF), the lead agency for the FPSSP. The Center had other parents involved in this process in order for us to understand the funding that came into the community through DCF and to have a say in what programs got the money.

I also attended meetings where DCF staff created and laid out their work plans. This gave me and the other parents who attended a chance to talk to the policymakers. I guess some people might at first be afraid at those meetings, but I'm very outspoken and have no trouble saying what I think. I think they received me well. They gave the parents a stipend of $25 to help pay for childcare. I had arranged for childcare and only needed to accept the stipend once.

FRC: How are you currently involved with the Center?

JC: Because I had volunteered for 40 hours through the Center, parents elected me to serve on the executive board of the Center, as secretary. I had completed my service with Americorps, and my work with DCF had shown the others at the Center my dedication and commitment.

As secretary, I write up the minutes of meetings and give them to New Haven Family Alliance, which provides administrative support to parents working through the Center, and to board members. The board meets with foundations to ensure the Center's compliance with grant requirements. In general, we voice our concerns on the continuation of the Center for Parent and Neighborhood Involvement. In June, the board had an awards luncheon to honor parents who contributed their time and effort to the group.

Because of my experience reviewing grant applications, I got the idea that parents at the Center could be trained in grant writing: how it's done, the specialized terms involved. We could write the grants that fund the Center, and that knowledge might help some people get a good job. We're planning a retreat so we can learn to handle a budget and funds. Eventually, we would like to have ongoing training for parents.

At the Center, we have advisors in specific areas, but the advisors are only called upon when we have questions, like how we should present ourselves to foundations or who we should go to and ask to do training with us. We would like the advisors to train parents in skills so that parents can earn CEU [continuing education] credits and have skills to show on their résumés.

FRC: What advice would you give to programs who are trying to encourage parent involvement and leadership?

JC: I think there has to be some way to pull the parents in—[a new program] needs to offer them something so that they can be able to get something out of the program. They could give stipends or CEU credits so parents can ... utilize [the credits] for résumé purposes.

Another thing is childcare. Programs need to discuss where parents are going to house their children while they attend meetings. Otherwise parents have to pay this extra cost, which can be hard. The program could organize day care while parents run their program so parents can get involved.

Transportation is also key to running a successful program, as a lot of the parents' incomes are spent on transportation for themselves and taking their kids to and from schools.

FRC: What do you feel is the most important work that parents can do in their communities?

JC: It's essential for parents to begin interacting in the community to find out what's available for their children that's positive and divert their children's energy into a positive academic environment so they'll grow up to be a political asset. It's also important for the children to grow up and have an intellectual life and confidence in themselves.

Georgia's Youth Futures Authority Involves Youths and Adults in Local Planning

by Jacqueline Elmore

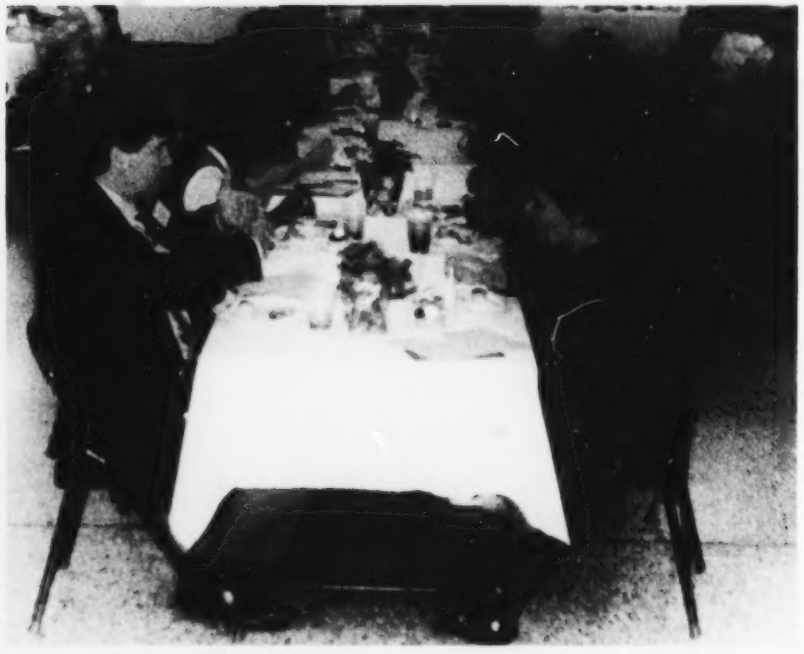

Photo by Youth Futures Authority

The most important element in comprehensive community building [is] the inclusion of residents of the neighborhoods in genuine decision making. This means helping residents (youth and adult) work, as equal partners, with representatives from public and private sectors to improve conditions in their neighborhoods. Involving people in using their own strengths to solve problems is the cornerstone of building strong neighborhoods. People must have the opportunity and resources to take control of their lives, and to sustain their families and communities.
—Dr. Otis Johnson, YFA Executive Director

The Chatham-Savannah Youth Futures Authority, created by Georgia state legislation in 1988, is a community collaborative comprised of representatives from the educational system, city and county government, social and human service agencies, the business sector, and youths and adults of the community.

Since its inception, the Youth Futures Authority (YFA) has learned first-hand that involving residents in the decision-making process requires not only a new way of thinking, but a shift in practice.

To continue this shift, YFA started its Community Change for Youth Development (CCYD) initiative, which promotes the involvement of youths and adult neighborhood residents in the leadership, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs and activities for themselves. An advisory council composed of residents is in charge of deciding and overseeing the services needed in the community, developing resources to carry out activities, and overseeing the budget that pays for services and activities.

Because this kind of community involvement in planning was a new order of business, creating trust and confidence had to be the first step. Organizational meetings for the youths included pizza parties and round-table discussions with the YFA administrative staff and representatives of Public Private Ventures, which provides technical assistance to YFA in implementing the Community Change for Youth Development initiative.

"At first, [some youths] were hesitant about becoming a part of a group that ran the risk of not being accepted by their peers," recalls Rhoney Trippett, CCYD Director. At a facilitated retreat, however, youths saw that "they could set the agenda for what is acceptable and model this behavior for other youth." Adult coordinators of the initiative gave direction and consistently demonstrated sincere concern and interest in the youths; this promoted the requisite comfort level, and soon a youth council was formed, complete with by-laws and a vision statement. Even before the initiative became a reality, community residents were included in planning meetings that crafted the design for the Community Change for Youth Development initiative.

When YFA staff traveled to Philadelphia to hold preliminary discussions with Public Private Ventures about implementation of the initiative, members of the community advisory council always accompanied them. Their inclusion showed the value placed on creating equal partnerships that is crucial to making local leadership work. Pearl Spaulding, a member of the advisory council, is proud of her involvement in planning the services of her local family resource center: "I had to get to know everybody; now I make suggestions to the staff and serve as secretary of the council."

Funding for Community Change for Youth Development and the other initiatives of the Youth Futures Authority comes from both local and national sources. Partner agencies that represent the human and social service arena collaborate in YFA; they have committed to joint decision making, joint allocation of funds, and joint accountability measures through signed memoranda of understanding. The YFA model is in the process of being replicated in other communities in Georgia.

Jacqueline Elmore can be reached at Youth Futures Authority, 316 East Bay Street, Savannah, GA 31401, 912/651-6810.

Parent Network Center:
Parents Help Each Other Advocate for Children With Disabilities

by Joan M. Watkins

The Parent Network Center brings together parents of children with disabilities in New York State to support, advocate, and empower each other. As staff, we are all parents of children with disabilities. Together with families, we develop strategies and techniques for working with professionals in fields important to children's success. We use our first-hand experience and training to help other family-serving professionals understand the rights of families seeking services for their children, especially in the area of education. We believe that professionals must understand each other in order to form a partnership that will help children achieve their full potential.

Each parent who contacts the Parent Network Center is directed to the staff member who has the most experience in the type of disability that the family is dealing with. One staff member, for example, has a learning-disabled child and assists others in finding resources on development of reading skills, remedial help, and experts with whom they can consult.

In addition, each of us has an area of specialization: early childhood, legal advocacy, formulation of individual education plans, and outreach to the African American and Latino communities are some examples. Staff members coordinate support groups to bring together parents whose children have similar disabilities; through these support groups and one-on-one meetings and conversations, we provide support and education to help parents work in non-adversarial, collaborative ways with educators and other professionals with whom their children have contact.

We also put parents in touch with each other through Parent to Parent, a network of peer telephone support; through Parent to Parent, families throughout the state support and educate each other and benefit from the experiences and knowledge of others. The Parent Network Center is funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. It serves all of New York state except New York City.

Parents Share Emotional Support

In addition to pointing parents toward resources and experts, the parents who staff the Parent Network Center often play another crucial role: we listen to parents and help them cope with the intense and confusing emotions parents often feel when their children are born with or acquire disabilities. Grief counselors have noted that families in these situations often experience feelings that are very much like those related to death. These situations result in the loss of a dream; we often feel that the future we planned for our families has been tragically torn away. As in the case of a death, we grieve for what we wanted life to be like.

The parents who staff the Parent Network Center play a number of crucial roles: In addition to pointing parents toward resources and experts, we listen and help them cope with the intense and confusing emotions parents often feel when their children are born with or acquire disabilities.

Shock is usually the initial stage, and is followed by denial: "This can't be happening!" But at the Parent Network Center, we point out to parents the ways in which we see them planning for how they will cope with the situation, even as they may be denying it. As parents of children with disabilities, we know that while we are saying, "Oh, no!" we are also making some mental plans for how we will cope with the situation.

We also support other parents as they cope with anxiety, fear, depression, and guilt feelings that can occur and recur in any order and in response to unsettling events. Often individuals seeking help display anger; many times professionals and service providers believe this anger is in response to their actions, while in reality the parent is angry at the situation life has dealt him or her, or is reacting to previous bad experiences. We try to act on our knowledge that anger may be either destructive or productive, depending on how we handle it. On the positive side, anger can be the force that triggers necessary action. (You know how you feel when you are infuriated and you're "not going to take it any more.")

Most lists of the stages that grieving parents go through end with "acceptance." Parents are told by the world—including medical and educational professionals—that they must accept the disability. This message makes many parents feel torn apart: they do not have the "required" feelings, and they cannot accept the disability.

A child with a disability can be continually in need of assistance, services, therapies, medical help, and an educational setting that gives him or her the opportunity to learn. Parents can accept their beloved, vulnerable child unequivocally—but they cannot accept the disability that has only brought harm to the child.

We at the Parent Resource Network encourage family- and child-serving professionals to understand and to reassure parents about their feelings, giving parents permission to feel as they do. Because we have had similar experiences, we know that the best that can be expected is for parents to acknowledge the disability: "this situation exists." Having acknowledged the disability, parents can go on to do something about it.

If parents truly accepted the *disability*, there would be no impetus for progress. By accepting the *child* and acknowledging the reality of the disability, parents can marshal their forces to try to make things better for their beloved child, working as partners with understanding professionals.

Joan M. Watkins is Executive Director of Parent Network Center, 250 Delaware Ave., Suite 3, Buffalo, NY 14202, 716/853-1570 (phone), 716/853-1574 (fax).

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Turning Up the Volume On Parent Feedback in Evaluation

by Nilofer Ahsan

Increasingly, foundations, government agencies, communities, and the public at large have been scrutinizing how effectively our social service dollars are being spent. For family support programs, this has meant an increased push to measure efforts and successes. For most programs, such evaluation presents major challenges. In order for it to fulfill the requirements of all parties and support a strengths-based, empowering approach to working with families, evaluation must meet a number of criteria:

1. The evaluation must respond to the requests of all stakeholders—foundations, constituents, communities, program staff, and participants—for measurement of progress, results, and accomplishments.
2. Evaluation efforts must operate within the constraints that are unique to family support program models, such as: the flexibility and responsiveness of the family support approach, the time it takes to develop and implement family support program components, the limited funding base, and the voluntary nature of participation in many family support programs.
3. Evaluation must be useful and relevant for guiding program design, management, and implementation so that it does not to replicate more traditional service delivery models.

For the past 18 months the Family Resource Coalition has been identifying and developing conceptual frameworks, strategies, and tools that assess participant or consumer satisfaction. Coalition staff have been particularly interested in those models and tools that strive to address the uniqueness and diversity of family support contexts and extend the growing knowledge base of effective family support practice. The participant satisfaction tool presented here in draft form is one product of this effort.

The tool is designed with the expectation that each family support program using it will adapt sections to its own needs and context: to begin with, the program can adapt the cover page to include its logo and mission statement. Page one is a template that programs can modify to reflect their service components and features. The rest of the tool presents simply phrased questions and statements that allow participants to use family support principles to evaluate the program's current practice.

In keeping with the family support tenet that programs respond to communities' specific needs, the tool—when adapted—allows participants to evaluate the program in the context of its own stated mission or purpose. Another intent of this tool is to make family support principles understandable in a way that connects these principles to the day-to-day experiences of families participating in programs. The tool should offer programs some guidance and an opportunity not only to "talk the talk" but "walk the walk"—to meet the increasing demands for program evaluation, and to further the goal of parent involvement and empowerment.

Ultimately, this participant satisfaction tool seeks to provide the field with a way to strengthen and affirm the partnerships that exist between programs and participants, promote ongoing dialogue and participant involvement, and inspire acknowledgment of families' and programs' progress and successes. The initial draft of this tool, printed here, will be field-tested in English- and Spanish-language versions throughout the United States later this year. FRC welcomes your questions, comments and suggestions. Please contact Nilofer Ahsan, FRIENDS Director, Family Resource Coalition, 200 S. Michigan Avenue, 16th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604, 312/341-0900 or 312/341-9361 (fax).

Many thanks to the following people for contributing to the development of this tool: FRC Senior Training Specialist Brenda Rodriguez; FRC Intern David Diehl; Joyce Bowen of the Chicago Urban League; FRC Washington, D.C., Liaison Maria Elena Orrego; FRC President Bernice Wiessbourd; and members of the FRC Best Practices Project Steering Committee: Hedy Chang, Moncrieff Cochrain, Emily Fenichel, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Linda Passmark, and Karen Pittman.

DRAFT

[Place your program's logo here:]

NEIGHBORHOOD FAMILY CENTER

[Place your mission statement here:]

The Neighborhood Family Center is dedicated to creating opportunities for families to exercise power and self-determination in governing their own lives. The Center's mission is to enhance and sustain healthy families and communities in which people make their own decisions, take their own initiative, help and support each other, and have a strong sense of belonging.

DRAFT

How are we doing?

What Services Do You Use?

The Neighborhood Family Center offers the following services. Please check off those that you have participated in during the last year.

- ❑ Community Activities
- ❑ Nutrition Classes
- ❑ Volunteer Opportunities
- ❑ Entrepreneurial Program
- ❑ Share Food Program
- ❑ Breast Feeding Education
- ❑ Kawaida Boutique
- ❑ Case Management (Medical)
- ❑ Teen Advocacy
- ❑ Self-esteem Enhancement
- ❑ Life Skills Workshops
- ❑ Resource and Referrals
- ❑ Support Groups
- ❑ Counseling
- ❑ Substance Abuse Education
- ❑ Job Readiness Program
- ❑ Case Management
- ❑ Recreational Activities
- ❑ Developmental Screenings
- ❑ In-School Workshops
- ❑ WIC Referrals
- ❑ Transportation Assistance
- ❑ GED
- ❑ Group Therapy
- ❑ Preventative Health Education
- ❑ Drop-In Day Care
- ❑ Home Visits
- ❑ Vocational/ Career Training

What other services would you like to see offered at the Center? (Continue on back)

Is there anything you'd like to tell us about the services you've received? (Continue on back)

What do we believe in?

Below we list our guiding principles and ask questions about the services you received at the center. Your answers will help us provide services that reflect our core beliefs.

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
1. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.					
• Do you feel welcome when you enter the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do staff listen to your point of view and encourage you to make your own decisions?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do staff work with you to identify and meet your needs?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Is program information communicated in a way that is clear and easy to understand?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do you feel staff respect your family members (including those you consider family)?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Are staff interested in and respectful of what you think about child rearing?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
2. Programs enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youths, and children.					
• Is everyone you consider family invited to participate in center activities?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do programs and services at the center meet the needs and interests of all members of your family?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• While participating in the family center, have you learned about how your child learns and grows, and the role you play in supporting your child?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Does the center make a positive difference in your life and the life of your family?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Does the center provide childcare, transportation, and other forms of support so that you can participate in services?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.					
• Has the center helped you participate in community activities?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Are there opportunities for you to support center activities and other families in the program?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do you feel more confident in solving some of your family problems or dealing with difficult situations because of your involvement with the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do center staff ask for and listen to your opinions and feedback about services and activities at the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Have you been invited to plan or coordinate activities at the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
4. Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.					
• Does the center provide services in the language that you are most comfortable with?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do staff respect your family's culture and identity?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Are center activities and programs consistent with what you teach your children about culture, history, and values?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do the program environment and activities show pride in your community's culture, identity and achievements?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

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	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
• Do you meet and learn from people of different cultures and backgrounds at the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do the center's classes, activities and materials reflect your culture, language and background?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.					
• Do center staff help you and your family feel more connected to your community?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do all types of families in the community use the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do center staff organize activities that improve life in your community?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Is the center active and responsive to the issues important to families in your community?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.					
• Does the center bring families together to discuss and share concerns about community issues?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Does the center listen carefully to your needs and concerns and refer you to other agencies and organizations that can help or assist you?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• If yes, are these referrals helpful?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do center staff help you to get services, or resolve problems with other service providers?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do center staff encourage you to share your views and take a leadership role within the community?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.					
• Does the center staff help you get the services you need?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Have you learned of clubs, associations, social activities, and other community events through the center?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Does the center provide opportunities for families in the community to get together and meet?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.					
• Is the center easy to get to?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Are services available at convenient times?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do you have to wait to participate in activities or use specific services?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Does the center provide what your community needs?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do you feel that staff care about you and your family?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Has the center developed new activities or programs as community needs have emerged?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
• Do you feel comfortable sharing concerns about the program with staff?	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

What do you like best about the center? (Continue on back)

What do we need to work on? (Continue on back)

Thank you for answering our questions.

Your answers and opinions are important.

The information provided will help us to learn and grow, and to serve you better.

The guiding principles and key practices used in this evaluation tool were developed as part of Family Resource Coalition's Best Practices Project and are excerpted from Guidelines for Family Support Practice, *published in July 1996 by Family Resource Coalition.*

Empowering Parents is Mining Diamonds in the Rough

by Ted Bowman

Marilyn Nolt

It can be said of most, if not all, families with whom we work that they are "diamonds in the rough." Underneath even the most cautious, guarded exterior is a person with talents, skills, and dreams looking for a place for the sparkle to emerge and be seen. To be sure, some diamonds are camouflaged better than others. Even so, all families have resources. Our tasks as parent educators include finding those resources and affirming with parents that they and their families possess them.

Regarding families as "diamonds in the rough" can require a shift in thinking, otherwise known as a paradigm shift. The shift is from seeing some families only as troubled, disadvantaged, or dysfunctional, to expending the time and energy to look at the strengths and abilities parents possess, even while seeing their issues clearly. Such a shift requires a willingness to pursue the goal of parent empowerment in spite of barriers erected by those who are paying too much attention to what's missing and what's wrong. Funding streams in many human service, health care, and educational systems are driven by attention to and removal of problems. The trend toward managed care and "doing more with less" can exacerbate this emphasis. Diligence is required if attention to assets, strengths, capacity, and hope are to prevail over what is wrong or missing.

There are perspectives and processes that family resource professionals can use to help facilitate recognition and use of strengths and resources:

Choose to look. Some diamonds just pop out as we walk by. But most will never be discovered unless someone is looking. What appears as dysfunction may hide survival skills and resourcefulness . . . unless we choose to look. Also, broaden your ways of looking for diamonds in the rough. Your life experience affects the way you view families and their circumstances. Someone of a different background will see different things. Ask colleagues, including parents, how they look for diamonds.

Know what you are looking for. The growing literature on resiliency, empowerment, and family strengths provides an impressive array of clues about the things that help families deal with adversity: problem-solving skills, support, hope, the presence of supportive adults (sometimes called mentors), and a way of making sense or meaning of life stresses are but a few. While none of these factors guarantee resiliency, looking for and recognizing them helps us be alert to things parents and children already are doing to cope with tough stuff in their lives. Further, if these or other protective factors or resources are absent, we can work with families to add them or to compensate for their absence.

Create a critical mass of searchers. While it is crucial that each family educator look for diamonds in the rough, the impact of individuals' efforts can be enhanced by a group's efforts. One voice has power; additional voices add to the power, credibility, and clout of our multiple messages of recognition and affirmation. If you do not work in collaboration with other family-serving workers, now is the time to start. Find out who else also works with the families you work with. Join hands with public health nurses, university extension staff, school personnel, and others in searching for diamonds in the rough. If you work in groups, pause periodically to engage the group in reflecting on strengths they have become aware of as they have observed or listened to one another.

Share your discoveries with families. Carl Dunst says that there are a lot of competent people out there who are not empowered because they don't yet believe in their own competence.[1] Sharing your observations of a family's strengths and resources can be a first step in fostering that family's ability to do the same. When you see a diamond, let the diamond know. Otherwise, the diamond may think it's just another rock. You may need to reinforce your observation. When individuals or families have not been the recipients of such affirmation, they may be dubious or even cynical about what you are saying and why you are saying it. Try something

Marilyn Nolt

like: "Ted, I have something to say to you. I want to name some strengths I think you possess which you may not now see or be ready to believe. But I see them. And I want to tell you what I see in the hopes that one day you will be aware of these rich resources." Galway Kinnell has a haunting poem in which there is a line to the effect that sometimes it is necessary to "reteach a thing its loveliness."[2] Family support professionals teach and reteach about loveliness.

Aid families in owning their resources. Calling attention to strengths is but one step in the process of promoting resiliency. Aid parents and children in seeing ways they have been and are resourceful in the face of adversity. Past successes can build a foundation for future achievements. Even when their choices may not have worked out or been the "best" choices, affirm them for attempting to cope effectively. Support them in utilizing their own and others' assistance. A willingness and an ability to engage in problem solving is one of the keystones of resiliency. Hence, a parent who is making choices of any kind may have one of the tools useful in coping. Help parents to discover this about themselves. Then, aid them in refining the choices they pursue.

Remember that empowerment must be taken. Many people view people's efforts to empower others as just another form of "one-upping": someone with power gives power to another. Many find such actions demeaning, arrogant, and patronizing. Remember that empowerment is not something that can be given; it must be taken. Your discovery of diamonds in the rough will not necessarily change someone's life. The person may be unable to see the diamond which you are calling to their attention. No matter what the consequences, embracing a commitment to search for strengths and resources creates a different way of viewing parents and children. Whether a lot of diamonds are discovered or not, and whether or not parents see the same diamonds you do, can be incidental to the act of searching. It is the creation of a climate of recognition and affirmation that promotes the probability that parents and children themselves will discover their own diamonds. When that occurs, empowerment has been taken. The musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock have a song about a girl who grew up in a house with no mirrors.[3] The only images she saw of herself were those she received from others, including Nana, who also lived in the house. The chorus, "The beauty that I saw in everything was in her eyes, was in her eyes," shows how Nana provided an environment in which empowerment could be taken!

Avoid false praise and cheerfulness. When searching for diamonds in the rough, you may find some "rough." The rough may include past or present experiences of pain, loss, or grief. A searcher for diamonds in the rough does not avoid comments about pain. People who are grieving tell me that the last thing they need, especially when in the midst of grieving, is premature cheering-up. Rather, what they want is acknowledgment of their loss. Surround them with care and empathy. And you may discover, even in the midst of grief, diamonds of coping with loss which deserve discovery and affirmation. Such understanding often creates a climate for greater cheer.

Dreaming new dreams may require letting go of old dreams. Before families can look for diamonds, they may need to attend to their losses, and to receive support in doing so. Picture the family who discovers at birth that their longed-for child has a birth anomaly which will add challenges the rest of the child's life. Most parents speak about such discoveries as a loss of dreams and loss of the future the family had hoped for. Before a new story can be created, before a new dream can be sought, it is often essential to face the loss. Or picture the parent who grew up in poverty and who vowed that her children would never experience such hardship. If circumstances have left her in poverty now, she may have to face shattered dreams before she becomes willing to search for new ones. Honor her loss. If you feel overwhelmed, link up with a grief professional and ask for assistance. Practice self-care; polish your own diamond. Doing what is advocated in this article requires patient, persistent effort and self-care. Put items on your calendar that are likely to polish your diamond. Further, for your sake and the sake of the families with whom you work, find ways to share your work with colleagues. Imagine a staff lounge filled with conversations about "diamonds in the rough." Think of the contrast this would pose to an area where staff are discussing only problems and deficits. Surround yourself with hopeful colleagues, not complainers. Resources grow best when we share our work. So find support for yourself as a diamond collector as you build a broader support system for parents and children. Working toward enhancing family strengths is a many-step process. Families will be better able to access and utilize information or skills, set realistic goals, and draw on other tools when they have pride and confidence in themselves. So keep digging for diamonds. They are all around you. And they are not that hard to find.

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Notes

[1]DUNST, C. (1994). *Supporting and strengthening families: Methods, strategies and practices.* (Cambridge, Mass: Brookline Books).

[2]KINNELL, G. (1980). "Saint Francis and the Snow" in Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company) 9.

[3]BARNWELL, Y. M. (1992). "No Mirrors in My Nana's House," recorded on Still On the Journey compact disc by Sweet Honey in the Rock (Redway, Calif.: EarthBeat! Records).

National Parent Assembly: Opportunities, Challenges, and Results

by Lucy Trujillo and Kathy Goetz Wolf

Educators, service providers, and policymakers have convened repeatedly in past years to discuss the importance of involving families in the educational process, in their communities, and in local government.

Often parents have been the highlight of many of these meetings. In order to support parents in making their own voices heard at policy-making tables, the Family Resource Coalition and the Danforth Foundation convened the first national Parent Assembly May 1–4, 1996, in conjunction with the FRC national conference. This article is an attempt to summarize the lessons learned from that experience, to share information with the hope that it will benefit other organizations that are developing mechanisms to involve parents in the family support discussion.

OPPORTUNITY

Background

A few years ago, under the auspices of the Danforth Foundation, parents from several school- and community-based programs had an opportunity to meet in St. Louis. Parents who attended reported that as a result of the meeting and of the process of sharing their accomplishments, obstacles, and aspirations with other parents, they had acquired a greater sense of power in their lives. When program officers of the Danforth Foundation met in Clearwater, Florida, in November 1994, they decided to build on that success by sponsoring a national gathering of parents. The Danforth Foundation approached the Family Resource Coalition to facilitate what would be called the first national Parent Assembly. The original proposal called for the assembly to be organized by parents and for the assembly's agenda to be determined by those parent organizers. The Parent Assembly would be a conference convened explicitly by and for parents.

Basic Plan and Expectations

The main plan for the Parent Assembly was to bring together parents from low-income communities who were leaders in school and community involvement and who represented programs that were consumer-guided, consumer-driven, and had been successful in building capacities in families. The plan was to select sites across the nation and to bring in a group of four parent participants from each site. Sociodemographic variables to be considered in the selection were: income, education, ethnic background, and gender of parent participants. Other variables included: group cohesiveness, size of group, duration of group, and type of leadership (including leadership by consumers as opposed to schools or agencies).

The plan called for organizers in community-based family support organizations to convene these groups of parents, who would plan and attend the Assembly. In order to ensure that the Parent Assembly maintained its goal of a consumer-driven agenda, it was anticipated that each group in its local site would take part in several activities leading to the Assembly. These activities included mobilizing local parents, assessing community needs, networking with those in the other participating sites, and collaborating in building the Parent Assembly agenda. Designated Family Resource Coalition staff and consultants would provide technical assistance to each group, coordinate efforts and foster intersite communication, and ensure that the activities at each site be undertaken in a timely fashion.

The funding for this initiative was designed to meet needs that any economically challenged participant or program could be expected to have. The budget included expenses such as airfare, meals, lodging, and ground transportation; it also earmarked $1,500 per site to cover items that would not generally be expected. This money could be used to cover the costs of local planning meetings or the development of handouts for use at the conference. If determined appropriate and reasonable by the local planning committee, parents could have used the mini-grants to purchase conference attire, to pay for childcare for the days they were out of town attending the conference, or to meet some other unique, individually identified need.

Objectives

The original Parent Assembly goals were:

1. To plan and convene a Parent Assembly that features parents in leadership roles
2. To bring parent leaders together to form a national support network while providing them with the opportunity to learn from one another about new roles and approaches to parent involvement
3. To strengthen individual efforts through interchange and mutual support and foster development of more parent leadership efforts throughout the country
4. To develop and disseminate two products, one for parents and one for professionals who work with parents, whose content would be determined by parents

Building on the Work of the Coalition's Affinity Groups

Family Resource Coalition has a membership of more than 1,500 community-based family resource programs and practitioners, which is the Coalition's biggest asset in connecting the national organization with grassroots community efforts. The Family Resource Coalition's membership includes two affinity groups: the African American Caucus and the Latino Caucus. The Caucuses help to build a network of communities, professionals, and families of color within the family support movement and to connect the Family Resource Coalition to this network. Identifying and nurturing indigenous leaders in communities has been one of the Caucuses' primary activities and one of their most significant contributions to the knowledge base of the Coalition and to the family support field.

The Parent Assembly grant offered the Caucuses an attractive opportunity to add to their ongoing work within the Coalition. Family Resource Coalition agreed to use the Caucuses as a foundation on which to build the Parent Assembly. Through planning the Parent Assembly, the Caucuses sought to mobilize parents as a national constituency. Their vision was that parents would significantly influence discussions about what kinds of program models, practices, guidelines, policy incentives, staffing skills and patterns, and governing structures work best in diverse communities; as well as what strategies are necessary to increase parents' involvement in communi-

ty-based family resource centers, school-community partnerships, and other initiatives aimed at achieving desired outcomes for children and their families.

In each site selected by the Caucuses to participate, a member of the steering committee of either the African American Caucus or the Latino Caucus was available to support start-up activities. The selection of these sites made it possible for project start-up to occur immediately and allowed every local community access to technical assistance through Caucus volunteers.

Participating Sites

Site Location	Community-Based Partner
Atlanta, Georgia	Atlanta Family Support Institute, Inc.
Brownsville, Texas	The Valley Interfaith Education Fund
Chicago, Illinois	Logan Square Neighborhood Association
Chicago, Illinois	Center for New Horizons
Cleveland, Ohio	Ohio Rainmakers
Denver, Colorado	Cheltenham Family Resource School
Miami, Florida	Rainmakers, Inc.
New Haven, Connecticut	New Haven Family Alliance, Inc.
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Madeira Family Center
San Fernando, California	Vaughn Family Center
St. Louis, Missouri	Grace Hill Neighborhood Services, Inc.

Three of the original sites dropped out of the Assembly due to other commitments: the Brownsville, Texas, site and the two Chicago sites. Three sites joined later in the process: two in Chicago, with Family Focus and the Ounce of Prevention as their community-based partners, and one in Cincinnati, Ohio, organized by Friends of Heberle.

Other programs also sent parents to the Parent Assembly, funded by sources other than the Danforth Foundation: Parents Place in San Francisco; Parent Services Project in Fairfax, California; and the Children's First Initiative/The Hartford Foundation in Hartford, Connecticut. Parents from these programs were not selected according to the original criteria and did not take part in pre-conference activities at their sites.

WHAT HAPPENED

As the plan called for, approximately 60 parents met for four days at FRC's national conference in Chicago. Parents who came to Chicago for the Parent Assembly were be able to attend all sessions of the larger conference, but Parent Assembly meetings were closed to other attendees of the FRC national conference (whether program participants/parents or staff of programs or agencies) in order to safeguard the agenda and facilitate the work to be done at the Assembly by the parent participants.

When the Parent Assembly convened, its agenda called first for each site to make a presentation to the larger group about issues facing its community and the work that parents had initiated to address those issues. The parent groups were excited about the opportunity to attend the Family Resource Coalition conference and the first national Parent Assembly, and welcomed the chance to present the work they were doing at home to other groups like them from around the nation. Consider the experience of parents involved in Cheltenham Family Resource School in Denver, Colorado.

The Cheltenham group was delighted to be invited to participate in the Parent Assembly. More than 450 students, from nursery school through second grade, attend Cheltenham, which, like the city's 10 other Family Resource Schools, seeks to increase student achievement and parent involvement, increase the skills and capacity of parents, and coordinate the resources and services available for families. In the past, Cheltenham school and project funds had allowed the principal, the project coordinator, and an occasional teacher to attend the FRC conference; while they had found funds to cover parents' registration at local conferences, they had little success securing money for parents' airfare, lodging, and incidentals connected to national conferences.

The local coordinator for Parent Assembly activities led the process of selecting which parents would attend; she took into consideration which parents had developed presentation skills, made home visits, done case management work, set personal goals and achieved them (such as getting a GED, entering college, finding a job, or learning English), and/or held leadership positions (such as officer of the PTA or Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee or member of the school-based governance committee). Bilingualism was a major consideration; the vast majority of 'involved' Cheltenham parents are monolingual Spanish speakers and would only best be served if the conference were bilingual. Also, parents self-selected when it came time to make the commitment to leave their families behind for five days.

In preparation for the Parent Assembly, parents—convened by the coordinator—met to discuss their experiences as leaders and advocates, and how they could use connections with others nationwide to channel those experiences into policy making that would benefit families. Cheltenham has a large and very active parent group. All of the parents who took part in the Assembly had been involved in activities at Cheltenham Family Resource School for at least three years, conducting home visits, carrying out case management, being active in the PTA and in the Razalogia parent empowerment program (for information on Razalogia, see *FRC Report*, Fall/Winter 1994–95, page 14), and advocating for themselves and for each other in many other ways. They had presented their issues to government officials, funders, program developers, and evaluators, who visit frequently because of the well-known success of Family Resource Schools. They had derived in-depth knowledge of their community and its impact on the school by conducting community assessments.

But they had not had the opportunity to discuss how this work had affected their own growth. They knew each other from having worked side by side, but in preparing for the Parent Assembly they built on their relationships in new ways. They spoke from their own experiences about the conditions in the community that contribute to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, language barriers, poverty, health care (or lack of it), employment, housing, teen pregnancy, educational failure, and employment, and they spoke of being frustrated when every year they talked to people in the systems, yet still struggled to find support and resources for their efforts to eliminate these conditions. The possibility of networking with others nationwide added to their vision of what they could accomplish. They discussed how they might apply the knowledge and skills they had developed locally in the larger policy-making arena.

Cheltenham parents conducted a workshop at the FRC conference entitled Back to School: Where Families Advocate for Themselves. Approximately 90 people attended, and no one left during the one-and-one-half-hour presentation. Parent Assembly participants commented afterward that the Cheltenham parents covered all of the issues that they had come to discuss; they gave voice and meaning to the previously marginalized parent participant. The experiences of which they spoke seemed to be emblematic of the stories shared by the more than 50 other parents who participated in the Parent Assembly at the FRC conference.

According to the agenda established for the Parent Assembly, presentations by local sites were supposed to take place during

the morning of the first day, however, because of the great interest in fully sharing each group's experience these presentations stretched well into the second day, thereby greatly affecting the agenda for the Assembly. More time was then spent deciding how to revise the agenda. In addition, several logistical problems occurred that diverted the energy and the attention of the attendees and which affected the entire group (see below).

Parents agreed that future Parent Assemblies would be a good idea and would help them further their goals by creating a supportive national network and by providing a forum in which they could share ideas and learn from each other. Part of the meeting was spent brainstorming next steps.

Overall, the meeting met its goal of bringing parents from low-income communities together and serving as a springboard for future action, but it did so without most participants feeling that it was an unmitigated success. Why?

OBSTACLES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In retrospect, it is clear that those who convened the Parent Assembly greatly underestimated the complexity of the event, and therefore the difficulty of planning it. Facilitating planning in the sites without substantial resources for community organizing efforts, coordinating communication and reaching consensus on an agenda among groups scattered nationwide using only the telephone, and bringing a large group of low-income parents to a national gathering all were more difficult than anticipated. As a result, the Parent Assembly was not the conference for parents by parents that it was intended to be.

Planning

It was impossible to ensure that parents were adequately involved in planning and difficult for local sites to facilitate a participant-led planning process for the event. Since parents weren't involved in selecting sites for the project, involving parents and generating enthusiasm among parents became a task for the coordinators. These coordinators were generally program directors or administrators with full-time program responsibilities and no direct connection to the funding source. This being the case, it was unrealistic to expect that the Parent Assembly could be a major focus of their time or attention.

Moreover, different sites had different processes: parents were included to different degrees and different amounts of planning occurred. There was no way to ensure that sites participate equally in the planning process nor even to promote enthusiastic involvement in the planning process at each site. The late addition of parents and sites further complicated planning.

As a result of all of these factors, deciding upon the details of the plan and fulfilling the requirements of the grant from the Danforth Foundation became the focal point for action. Site coordinators and FRC staff got bogged down in the what, why, and how of organizing the Assembly instead of concentrating on building and supporting relationships with the communities and facilitating a participatory planning process that relied heavily on parents to frame the agenda for the Assembly.

Choosing a Setting for the Gathering

A conference-within-a-conference seemed like a good idea because the attendees of the Parent Assembly would have access to the larger conference: they would be able to take part in all workshops, seminars, meals, and plenary sessions, and network with policymakers, practitioners, and parents. But in the end the conference-within-a-conference posed many problems. The FRC Conference is notorious for providing an overwhelming whirlwind of opportunities for its participants; it is exhilarating, demanding, and exhausting for attendees, and most participants report that the experience is tremendously enriching because of the wealth of knowledge, information, resources, people, workshops, and networking opportunities. The most frequent regret is that choosing to attend one session precluded attending others that looked equally promising. Parent Assembly attendees experienced this much more acutely than other conference attendees because so much of their time was devoted to Parent Assembly meetings.

The strategic intent of the Parent Assembly was that it would begin to increase the role parents play in the family support movement by convening a group of parents who would work together to address the challenges facing low-income families and communities. FRC's Caucuses hoped that as a result of this meeting a nucleus of parents interested in working together to advance this agenda would coalesce. To create this opportunity at the Family Resource Coalition conference meant the Assembly would be in some ways separate from the rest of the conference.

Many parents attending the Parent Assembly experienced this separation as isolation. They felt that they were not able to participate in the overall conference because their allegiance was to the Parent Assembly, and it took most of their time and energy. This isolation drew strong criticism from Parent Assembly participants. In addition, many conference attendees (including parents/program participants) who were not from Parent Assembly sites expressed disappointment and frustration in being restricted from participating in the Parent Assembly at the conference; many said they would have liked the opportunity to attend some or all it.

Clarifying Roles, Dedicating Adequate Resources

Any national organization that wishes to facilitate grassroots community organizing efforts must realize that to be effective it will need to invest significant resources in hiring, training, and supporting staff who can travel to local communities and engage with them as partners in mobilizing parents for change. This process requires clear definition of both the role of the staff involved in on-site work with the communities and the purpose of the overall organizing. Many barriers to the success of the Parent Assembly were created by problems with communication and with coordination between the Parent Assembly and the FRC conference overall. Clear lines of responsibility, oversight, and accountability were never established, and expectations regarding these matters were not adequately discussed nor agreed upon. In addition, staff changes at FRC and at the Danforth Foundation complicated the planning and administration of the project. Other factors contributing to planning problems were overall insufficient staff resources committed to the project and overreliance on the volunteers, and the difficulty of coordinating community organizing activities over the telephone.

Paying Attention to the Selection Process

Ideally, in this type of project, the national organization is supporting a parent-initiated process that goes as follows:

1. Parents develop the concept.
2. Parents develop the proposal.
3. Parents plan the event.
4. Parents decide who is invited.
5. Parents host and facilitate the event.

When the process does not occur in this way, as was the case with the Parent Assembly, the national organization must create a strategy for involving parents that maximizes their role as decision makers.

This could be done through a request-for-proposals process or another mechanism whereby parents and not staff play a leadership role in framing the agenda and the event from the project's inception.

Being Clear about Goals

Different strategies are important to achieving different goals. The Parent Assembly was burdened by its attempt to fulfill multiple, albeit complementary, goals on the back of a single meeting: to feature parents as leaders at a national family support conference; to encourage the formation of a national parent support network, a nucleus of parents who would work to increase the role parents play in shaping the agenda for the family support movement; to elicit from an assembled group of parents their views about the problems and challenges facing low-income communities and potential solutions; and to offer low-income parents from different regions of the country an empowering opportunity to come together with other parents to discuss their challenges, opportunities, and successes.

It is important to be clear about the project's primary objective and to structure the meeting accordingly. If, for example, the primary goal had been to feature parents as leaders, it would have been important to invite them to present workshops at the larger conference and to make that possible by paying their expenses and providing them with the opportunity to attend the entire conference.

If, on the other hand, the primary goal had been to form a national parent support network through an interchange of ideas, the Parent Assembly would have been structured to emphasize relationship building. This might have worked best outside of the context of the FRC national conference. Such an event could have been scheduled as follows:

- **Day One:** Showcase programs and communities
- **Day Two:** Facilitate dialogue and relationship building.
- **Day Three:** Identify, clarify, and prioritize the issues, concerns, and recommendations.
- **Day Four:** Develop structures to facilitate the ongoing "cross-pollination" of ideas and support.

Making Parents Feel Welcome

The Parent Assembly was intended to be composed of low-income parents. The grant was structured to cover travel and incidental expenses that parents might encounter. But the dissemination of the grant money was not executed with the experiences of low-income parents in mind. Instead of parents receiving money up-front to cover incidentals while still in their communities, money was given to them at the conference. Parents who had to pay for clothing, childcare, and other necessities before leaving their communities were to be reimbursed, but most did not have credit cards, so fronting these expenses was very difficult or impossible for them. Many were understandably nervous about whether all of their expenses would really be covered.

Many parents arrived uneasy because they had many questions that had not been answered in advance: What would a national conference be like? What knowledge and contacts could they expect to bring home from the conference? In addition, they worried about details: Would their meals be paid for? How would they call their families? In addition, many low-income parents have experienced overt discrimination and been ostracized and made to feel unwelcome in unfamiliar situations because of their race, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status. This was true of many Parent Assembly participants and it contributed to their initial uneasiness.

In order for events such as the Parent Assembly to be successful, parents must be made to feel welcome and comfortable immediately upon arrival, so that their doubts or worries evaporate and they can get on with their agenda. The onus is on the sponsoring organization to gain the parents' trust, which requires paying special attention to logistics: making sure that money to cover expenses is advanced and is easy to obtain, arranging with the hotel ahead of time to cover incidental expenses, and preparing staff to respond to participants' concerns graciously.

The single most embarrassing moment at the Parent Assembly was when a group of parents, relatively unfamiliar with and tired from airplane travel, tried to check into their hotel. They were denied access to their rooms because it was the hotel's policy to require a credit card to be presented in advance to cover incidental expenses. None had credit cards. In the end, after extensive intervention by FRC staff, Caucus steering committee representatives, and even the Danforth Foundation program officer, the hotel management disabled incidentals that would result in charges, which allowed participants to check in. Unalterable damage had been done to the quality of the Parent Assembly participants' experience. They felt humiliated, and the episode greatly detracted from the events of the next several days.

The power of an unintentional, negative experience should not be underestimated: in this case, such an experience confirmed parents' fears and worst expectations and undermined the relationship between the national organization and its grassroots constituency. It is incumbent on those planning such an event to anticipate any possible barriers or obstacles to their guests' maximal enjoyment, to quickly and effectively respond to problems as soon as they occur, and to bend over backwards to compensate participants who feel that they have been wronged.

FOLLOW-UP AND NEXT STEPS

After the Parent Assembly, Family Resource Coalition asked all parents who had participated in the gathering to evaluate their experiences by way of a bilingual survey that could be completed in writing or orally. FRC has received responses from one-third of participants and is continuing to make contact with more participants to obtain as much feedback as possible. While much of the feedback has reflected the difficulties presented by the problems discussed above, the surveys also indicate that many parents are very interested in continuing to pursue the goals of the Parent Assembly through future events and networking. Parents leaders do want to share their work in parent and community empowerment with others like them in other locations, and there is an interest in continuing this networking and support.

Family Resource Coalition is more committed than ever to facilitating organizing among and within grassroots communities and to building the constituency of the family support movement. From the experience of convening the Parent Assembly at its national conference, FRC learned more about the staff, resources, and strategies necessary for accomplishing these goals, and about the importance of realistically assessing the capacity of this national organization to undertake such an effort.

Lucy Trujillo, former project director of the Denver Family Resource Schools, now works as an independent consultant. In her current work, which centers on the development of family, school, and community partnerships, her primary objective is to provide guidance and support to teams in their efforts to identify and further develop parent leaders. She is a member of the steering committee of the Family Resource Coalition Latino Caucus.

Kathy Goetz Wolf is director of communications and publications for the Family Resource Coalition and is editor of FRC Report. She has worked with the Family Resource Coalition for five years.

National Organizations

Center for the Study of Parent Involvement

John F. Kennedy University
370 Camino Pablo
Orinda, CA 95360
510/254-0110
National clearinghouse created in 1973 that also provides training and technical assistance on parent involvement to community leaders and educators. Quarterly newsletter offers information about parent involvement programs around the nation.

Family Support Network

21902 Second Avenue West
Bothell, WA 98021
206/487-4009
http://www.familynetwork.org/wecare
(World Wide Web address)
wecare@familynetwork.org
(e-mail address)
Started as one woman's project to balance work and raising a family on a limited income. After collaborating with other community members to develop a network that facilitated an exchange of services and support (childcare, repair, carpentry, meal preparation, etc.), founder Cheryl Honey developed training to teach parents and family workers in other communities to do the same. Also offers "Good Neighbor" registration and "Family Advocate" certification.

Family Voices

P.O. Box 769
Algodones, NM 87001
505/867-2368 (phone)
505/867-6517 (fax)

National grassroots organization of families and friends speaking on behalf of children with special health care needs. Founded by parents who developed national and state family networks and organizations to improve the health and education systems that serve their children. Goal is to help shape national, state, and local health care policy and practice in private and public health care systems by:

1. Supporting a national network of volunteer regional and state coordinators who provide information to families and policymakers;
2. Serving as a clearinghouse to keep its members informed about health care issues; and
3. Forming partnerships with professionals and other state and national organizations to make sure the voices of families are heard. Is a partner with FRC in disseminating guidelines for health supervision of children and adolescents.

Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health

1021 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-2971
703/684-7710 (phone)
703/836-1040 (fax)
National parent-run organization focused on the needs of children and youth with emotional, behavioral, or mental disorders and their families. Serves as a catalyst for change by promoting partnerships among family members, professionals, and other interested citizens to improve services for children with emotional, behavioral, or mental disorders. Also provides leadership training of parents in advocacy and community outreach.

Girl Scouts Behind Bars

National Institute of Justice
Department of Justice
633 Indiana Avenue
Washington, DC 20530
The National Institute of Justice created and developed Girl Scouts Behind Bars, a program designed to prevent intergenerational cycles of criminal justice involvement and bring families closer together. The Girl Scouts who participate in the program are girls aged five to 11 whose mothers are incarcerated. They meet with their mothers in jail to work together on troop projects, which include sessions on self-esteem, drug abuse, relationships, coping with family crises, and teenage pregnancy prevention. The mothers also take part in classes on parenting and other life skills.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving

511 E. John Carpenter Fwy.
No. 700
Irving, TX 75062
214/744-6233
Parent-led organization that trains parents to get involved in schools and talk to the media to advocate against drunk driving. MADD parents serve on public, law enforcement, and legislative advisory boards and aid in establishing local and county initiatives and task forces. Parents provide victim assistance and conduct outreach. Workshops and publications available.

National Committee for Citizens in Education

10840 Little Patuxent Parkway,
Suite 301
Columbia, MD 21044
301/977-9300
Advocates for parent involvement and local action to improve the quality of education. Trains parents in school improvement techniques and publishes a newspaper for parents focused on public involvement and school improvement.

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education c/o Institute for Educational Leadership

1001 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 310
Washington, DC 20036
202/822-8405 (phone)
202/872-4050 (fax)
iel@iel.com (e-mail)
Advocates for the involvement of parents in their children's education and fosters relationships among home, school, and community that enhance young people's education. Is a collaboration of education, community, and public service organizations nationwide. Provides information on publications, training, and services available.

Parent Leadership Institute

P.O. Box 50492
Palo Alto, CA 94303
415/424-8687
Provides parenting workshops, classes, group leadership training, and resource materials to parents in advocating for their concerns. A core part of the Institute's work is teaching parents to utilize a set of mutual support counseling techniques, called Listening Partners, which they can use parent-to-parent.

Parents Anonymous

675 West Foothill Boulevard, Suite 220
Claremont, CA 91711-3475
909/621-6184 (phone)
909/625-6304 (fax)
HN3831@handsnet.org (email)
National organization that provides

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technical assistance and training on a variety of leadership skills for parents. Trains parents to train other parents to operate mutual support groups. Based on a vision that establishing parent input, leadership, and mutual support are essential components in strengthening families and preventing child abuse and neglect.

Parents as Teachers
9374 Olive Boulevard
St. Louis, MO 63132
314/432-4330 (phone)
314/432-8963 (fax)
PAT trains parents to be parent educators in its nationally replicated program to provide parents with the information and support they need to give their children the best possible start in life. Parents become certified to conduct home visits, coordinate group meetings, conduct developmental screenings, and link parents with providers of service and support. Parent educators work in partnership with the school and the community. Offers a variety of training and technical assistance.

Right Questions Project, Inc.
218 Holland Street
Somerville, MA 02144
617/628-4070 (phone)
Offers intensive training workshops in several cities to prepare community-based agencies to facilitate workshops in which parents learn how to effectively advocate on behalf of their children's education. Workshops help parents acquire specific tools to support and monitor their children's education and generate new knowledge about effective involvement. Targets parents who have not been reached by parent involvement programs.

Publications

Many of the organizations listed above have produced training manuals and other resources useful for increasing parent involvement and leadership positions; they can be contacted for information on these. The books listed below are available from the Family Resource Coalition, 312/341-0900.

Empowerment and Family Support
by Moncrieff Cochran, editor
From leading researchers in the parent empowerment movement comes this compilation of two years' worth of a networking bulletin published by members of the Cornell Empowerment Group. Articles offer research findings and program models to show how family support can empower families, especially low-income families, to meet the challenges that face them. Special topics include Child Care and the Empowerment Process, Redefining the Professional Role, and a Global View of Empowerment and Family Support.

Essential Allies: Families as Advisors
by Elizabeth S. Jeppson and Josie Thomas
Partnerships between families and practitioners are a key element of family support practice. Now comes an important guide to developing these partnerships. This practical resource equips service providers with guidelines on how to form healthy alliances with the families they work with, a well as information on the benefits of and barriers to collaboration.

Know Your Community: A Step-by-Step Guide to Community Needs and Resources Assessment
by Bryan Samuels, Nilofer Ahsan, and Jill Garcia
Based on FRC's experience assisting local programs, planners, and community residents, this easy-to-use manual walks you through the process of getting the important information you need about your community—including hidden resources. Highlights includes how to involve community residents on the planning team and assessing needs from residents' perspectives in defining community priorities.

Raise Your Legislator's Antenna: A Nuts-and-Bolts Guide to How (and Why) to Advocate For Families . . . With Families
by Shelley Peck and Kathy Goetz Wolf
With big changes in Washington and the prospect of even more in our states and communities, those who work with families need to speak out for the laws and programs that we know work. Get quick answers and steps you can take today to: involve parents in advocating for their own best interest, write and talk to lawmakers and the media, and team up with others to make a difference.

Starting and Operating Support Groups: A Guide for Parents
Family Resource Coalition
If you are a parent thinking of starting a support group or if you work with parents and want a resource that will help them help each other, this guide is for you. Produced in cooperation with the American Self-Help Clearinghouse, this manual defines support groups, gives tips for planning the first and subsequent meetings, and offers thoughts on maintaining a healthy group. Advice from parents who have started or run groups is included throughout the guide. Appendices provide valuable resource materials, including a complete guide on "Where to Find Parenting Support," sample flyers, sample meeting handouts, and a resource directory of publications and national organizations.

Changing the Way America Works for Families

Family Resource Coalition (FRC) works to bring about a completely new societal response to children, youths, and their families: one that strengthens and empowers families and communities so that they can foster the optimal development of children, youths, and adult family members—one that solves problems by preventing them. We envision a society in which all of us—families, communities, government, social service institutions, businesses—work together to provide healthy, safe environments for children and families to live and work in.

Family Resource Coalition is recognized as the national organization of all those who participate in the family support movement. Our job is to bring people together, to facilitate communication among proponents of the family support approach, to provide the most current family support information and resources, and to be the umbrella under which people and organizations come together to change the way America works for families. Family Resource Coalition:

- **Builds networks and strengthens connections among those in the family support field**

  FRC strives to enhance communication and collaboration among the many groups and individuals who are concerned about and work with families. Our membership brings together community-based program providers, school personnel, those who work in human services, trainers, scholars, and policy-makers. Our members have formed two special interest affinity groups: an African American and a Latino Caucus. And members have formed state and local networks in several places nationwide. We hold a biennial national conference which, with nearly 2,000 attendees, has become the national gathering place for those in the field of family support.

- **Provides resources and publications**

  FRC is the leading source for programmatic information about family support. We publish and distribute resources to give program providers and planners the information and tools they need to develop and maintain quality family-supportive programs.

- **Offers technical assistance and consulting services**

  We help community-based and state-level programs and planning groups build quality family-supportive practices into their policies, training, and service delivery systems.

- **Undertakes public education and advocacy efforts**

  We strive to increase public understanding of the family support movement and of the difference that family-supportive services are making in the lives of children and families. We work to build support for universally available family support opportunities, and we promote the adoption of family-supportive public policies at the federal, state, and local levels.

- **Develops the knowledge base**

  FRC works with researchers in the field, community-based family resource programs, and human service reform initiatives to expand what is known about family support—its forms, practices, and effects—and to promote quality practice in the field of family support.

For information on joining the Family Resource Coalition or to receive a catalog of our publications and services, contact us at 200 S. Michigan Ave., 16th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604, 312/341-0900 (phone), 312/341-9361 (fax) or via HandsNet at HN4860.

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